

STUDIES IN SLAVIC AND GENERAL LINGUISTICS

# VOICES ON BIRCHBARK

EVERYDAY COMMUNICATION  
IN MEDIEVAL RUSSIA



BY JOS SCHAEKEN

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## Voices on Birchbark

# Studies in Slavic and General Linguistics

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# Voices on Birchbark

*Everyday Communication in Medieval Russia*

*By*

Jos Schaeken



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*Item, est la ville de la grant Noegarde merveilleusement grant ville, située en une belle plaine, avironnée de grans forests et est en bas païs parfont de eaues et de places maresqueuses, et passe par le milieu de laditte ville une très grosse rivière, nommée Wolosco ...*

GHILLEBERT DE LANNOY, *Voyages et Ambassades*, DECEMBER 1413

(Edition: Potvin and Houzeau 1878: 32. See Mund 2002a)

• • •

*Великий Новгород—удивительно большой город, он расположен на большой равнине, окруженной большими лесами и находится в низкой местности среди вод и болот. Посреди упомянутого города течет большая река по имени Волхов (Wolosco).*

(Translation: Emel'janov 1873: 23–24, Kovalenko 2005: 25. See Mund 2002b)

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# Acknowledgements

This book is an updated and expanded scholarly version of a Dutch publication on birchbark documents from medieval Novgorod that I wrote some years ago for a larger audience (Schaeken 2012a). In a few instances, I have included additions to the Dutch text that have already been published elsewhere (in particular, Schaeken 2017a).

I am grateful to many people who were of great help and gave me invaluable advice at several stages of the work. Let me try to express my thanks in some sort of chronological order.

My Leiden colleague, Willem Vermeer, one of the few non-Russian scholars to have made highly significant and influential contributions to the field of study, encouraged me to engage in ‘the fine art of berestology’ in the 1990s.

My first visit to Veliky Novgorod was in 2001, for a conference marking the fiftieth anniversary of the discovery of the first birchbark document. There I met most of the Russian specialists for the first time in their ‘natural’ research environment, most notably the late Andrej A. Zaliznjak, and, among many others, Petr G. Gajdukov, Aleksej A. Gippius, Valentin L. Janin, Tat’jana V. Roždestvenskaja, and Elena A. Rybina. In particular, I am greatly indebted to Aleksej A. Gippius for his unwavering support and our close collaboration and detailed discussions over the past years. I also owe special thanks to Marina A. Bobrik, who commented in great detail on the final draft of this book. I would like to extend my gratitude to Valentin L. Janin for granting permission to reproduce photographs and drawings of birchbark documents.<sup>1</sup>

In the second half of the 2000s, I started working on this project with my American colleague Daniel E. Collins—a monograph in English on birchbark documents from medieval Novgorod. Unfortunately, we did not manage to complete the project as a joint effort. His initial contributions to this work are still invaluable, especially regarding the difficult task of translating birchbark texts into English in an understandable way, while trying to maintain the original phrasing and intention.

Translating birchbark texts into any modern language is a real challenge. This is also true for Dutch, my native tongue, in which I wrote my 2012 book on communication on birchbark. Many of the Dutch translations form the basis for the English versions in this work and I am grateful to my Dutch

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1 Other copyright permissions are indicated at the appropriate places in footnotes throughout the book.

colleagues Simeon Dekker and Janneke Kalsbeek for their critical comments. Simeon Dekker's editorial assistance in the final stage of this book was extremely helpful.

Needless to say, I am the only one to blame for all remaining mistakes and inconsistencies in this book: *a vo tomo božeja volja i tvoja* 'In this, may God's will be done, and yours' (birchbark letter no. 6 from Pskov, see Section II.2).

## Preface

In the photograph (Figure 1) you can see a piece of tree bark—more precisely, a piece of bark from the birch tree, which grows abundantly in the northern parts of Russia. The birchbark shown in the photograph comes from the northwest of European Russia, from the old city of Novgorod (or, as it was called in medieval times, Lord Novgorod the Great), approximately two hundred kilometers south of St. Petersburg.

Birchbark is a soft material, and it is easy to scratch marks and letters on it with a sharp instrument. You can use it to write notes for yourself or a message to someone else. This was a common practice in Novgorod and other cities in the region during the Middle Ages, when paper was not yet widespread, and parchment too valuable for everyday use. Strips of birchbark suitable for writing quite literally ‘grew on trees’; as by-products of the wood used for fuel, building, and handicrafts, they were readily available, easy to prepare, and cost nothing.

In the course of archaeological excavations in medieval cities in north-western European Russia, more than twelve hundred birchbarks with inscriptions have been found. The first text, N<sub>1</sub> (where ‘N’ stands for Novgorod; see Figure 61), was discovered in Novgorod on July 26, 1951, by Nina Fedorovna Akulova in the old ‘Slave Street’ (*Xolop’ja ulica*). Since then, almost every summer excavation season has brought new birchbark documents to light. The



FIGURE 1 Photograph of N<sub>202</sub> (Onfim's writing exercises).

photograph above shows a birchbark discovered in 1956, N202, written by Onfim, a young boy from the middle of the thirteenth century who left us several writing exercises, drawings, and notes. Onfim's legacy on birchbark, which is widely known and loved in contemporary Russia, will be discussed in detail in Section 11.6.

In this book we examine a large number of letters; they give a representative picture of the kinds of messages that were written on birchbark and the kinds of social situations they reflect. This work would not have been possible without the decades of intensive investigations by Russian scholars.

In Russian, the study of birchbark letters is sometimes known informally as *berestologija* ('berestology'), derived from the word *beresta* 'birchbark'. For many years, 'berestology' has been an interdisciplinary research venture that engages archaeologists, philologists, linguists, and historians. Archaeologists have been responsible not only for unearthing and preserving the birchbarks but also for much of the detailed and complicated research on their dating and material context. Philologists and linguists—often experts in both disciplines at once—have been responsible for much of the interpretation of the texts. The philologists have focused on the physical format of the letters, including their paleography, word-divisions, punctuation, and other graphic features; the linguists have concentrated on their language (phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics). Historians provide further input with expertise on the broader context. The interplay between these four disciplines has yielded a sophisticated, multidimensional interpretation of the messages and a deep understanding of their larger significance.

Most of the research on birchbark documents has been published in Russian and is highly specialized. Full references will be given at the end of the book. However, I would like to acknowledge at the outset the work of the late Andrej Anatol'evič Zaliznjak, whose monumental work *Drevnenovgorodskij dialekt* ('The Old Novgorod Dialect'; henceforth DND), published in 2004 (second edition), includes a comprehensive discussion of the birchbark letters known at that time<sup>2</sup> and an authoritative account of the remarkable language

2 DND presents full editions (though without photographs or drawings of the documents) of about 85% of the corpus of birchbarks from Novgorod, which were unearthed between 1951 and 2003 (N1–N950, the last one also known as Gorodišče 1; see Section 1.1.2, fn. 38). Editions of the remaining 15% (all minor fragments or written in a non-Slavic language; see below, Section 11.9) can be found in the NGB volumes (see next footnote), which offer drawings of almost all the documents. In addition, DND includes a selection of birchbark texts from other cities (see Section 1.2) as well as some other texts, not written on birchbark but of central importance for the study of the corpus. Among these alternative testimonies

that they reflect, different in many ways from the language of parchment documents.<sup>3</sup>

However, for a wider audience, especially people who do not understand Russian, the research field can be difficult to approach. The research tends to assume profound knowledge not only of prior publications, but also of Russian philology, linguistics, and history in general. Moreover, the birchbark texts themselves are often difficult to interpret, even for specialists, because they are usually written in a terse, at times telegraphic style, like a modern text message or tweet, and presuppose a particular contextual background and social and cultural knowledge that has become obscure with the passing of time. Even the canonical published translations of the original texts into Modern Russian do not always make them perfectly clear; there often remains room for further clarification and for reinterpretation.<sup>4</sup>

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of the written culture in Novgorod during the times of birchbark literacy, DND discusses some relevant documents on parchment and paper (DND 458–460, 686–693); inscriptions on church walls (DND 278–279, 342–343; see Section 1.6), stone crosses (DND 344, 457–458), spindle whorls (DND 457), and cylinder seals (DND 276–278; cf. N902, Section 11.3); writings on wax tablets (DND 342; cf. Figures 36–38 in Section 11.6); and also two texts on lead plates (*svincovye gramoty*), which in style and genre very much resemble what has come down to us on birchbark ('Svinc. 1', see NGB V, 154–155, and DND 261; 'Svinc. 2', see NGB XI, 146, and DND 456).

- 3 Apart from DND, there are three other major sources for the study of birchbark letters: (1) Systematic diplomatic editions of the finds by the Russian Academy of Sciences, which are available under the general title *Novgorodskie gramoty na bereste* (NGB) in twelve volumes (Vol. I, 1953 – Vol. XII, 2015). Note that the later volumes provide new readings of many letters that were published earlier; see, in particular, NGB VIII (181–217, 220–251), IX (123–180), X (82–122), and XII (196–275). (2) Preliminary reports of each season's excavations, which are published annually in the journal *Voprosy jazykoznanija*, the most recent ones being from 2016 (N1064–N1073 from Novgorod; see Gippius and Zaliznjak 2016) and 2017 (N1074–N1089 and Staraja Russa 46; see Gippius et al. 2017). (3) The website <http://gramoty.ru> (since 2010 also incorporated in the Russian National Corpus: <http://www.ruscorpora.ru/search-birchbark.html>), which includes editions and translations as well as high-resolution photographs and drawings for almost every document until the excavation year 2017. The website is the main result of the international INTAS research project no. 03-51-3867, coordinated by Leiden University and executed by a team of Russian specialists in the research field (see NGB XII, 10). In addition, hundreds of photographs of birchbark texts that are kept in the United Novgorod State Museum can be found at [www.novgorodmuseum.ru](http://www.novgorodmuseum.ru) (search in the online collection for 'berestjanye gramoty').
- 4 There are only a few collections of birchbark documents available in a non-Slavic language: Melin's concise and outdated anthology in German (1966); Thompson (1967, 55–63; with English translations of only a dozen texts); Faccani's selection of some ninety texts, with translations and short commentaries in Italian (1995); Vermeer's textbook in Dutch, which mainly concentrates on the linguistic aspects of birchbark letters (1999); Le Feuvre's short

The birchbark letters deserve to be more widely known, as they provide unique and fascinating insights into everyday life, trade, law, statecraft, class relations, and interpersonal communication in a vibrant medieval culture. There are few comparable collections of vernacular documents from the Middle Ages, especially on such a vast and varied scale. In recent years, there has been growing interest in the study of interpersonal documents, especially in the burgeoning fields of people's history ('history from below'), microhistory, historical sociolinguistics, and pragmatics. While chronicles, edicts, religious texts, and other 'public' works, written calligraphically on parchment and intended to be used in the long term, are invaluable sources for history and for the history of language, texts meant to be private and ephemeral—messages on papyrus, wooden tablets and sticks, birchbark, and later paper—often give us a more nuanced, inside view of events as they were actually unfolding and language variation as it occurred in diverse social contexts.<sup>5</sup>

In Part II of *Voices on Birchbark*, we use individual birchbark letters to give vignettes of daily life in the medieval Russian Northwest. Building on those vignettes, in Part III of the book we examine the pragmatics of communication on birchbarks—how they were used to structure interpersonal relations and to organize society, and how their language reflects the diverse individual, institutional, and historical contexts in which they were used. Thanks to decades of research, we have a full understanding of the language of most of the birchbark letters with regard to its formal features. However, there is still much work to be done on the pragmatic aspects of birchbark communication: how and by whom were the messages framed, conveyed, and interpreted? Why were such ephemeral messages written down in the first place? As recent studies have shown, birchbarks can reflect practices that differ markedly from the pragmatics of writing in modern technological societies; in particular, they often reveal strategies that are characteristic of interactive spoken communication. These new insights shed much light on the growth of literate practices in societies that have previously relied mostly on oral communication.

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overview in French (2015). There is also a French documentary film by Marc Jampolsky, in which communication on birchbark is vividly brought to life: *Novgorod, lettres du Moyen Âge* (2004). Finally, an (outdated) anthology in Polish is provided by Kuraszkiewicz (1957). For surveys in Russian of birchbark writing, including commentaries on many texts, see Čerepnin (1969; mainly outdated) and Janin (1998; written for a general audience).

- 5 For some comparisons with similar ancient and medieval corpora (papyri from Oxyrhynchus, Egypt; thin wooden tablets from Vindolanda, Northumbria; medieval runic inscriptions on small wooden sticks from the Bryggen wharf district in Bergen, Norway), see Garrison (1999), Franklin (2002, 35–45), Schaeken (2012b, 204–208), Ślupecki (2013).

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# Abbreviations

## Birchbark documents

DND	Zaliznjak, A.A. 2004a. <i>Drevnenovgorodskij dialekt</i> . 2nd ed. Moskva. Also available online at <a href="http://gramoty.ru">http://gramoty.ru</a> .
NGB	<i>Novgorodskie gramoty na bereste</i> . Moskva. I: Arcixovskij, A.V., and M.N. Tixomirov. 1953. <i>Iz raskopov 1951 g.</i> II: Arcixovskij, A.V. 1954. <i>Iz raskopov 1952 g.</i> III: Arcixovskij, A.V., and V.I. Borkovskij. 1958a. <i>Iz raskopov 1953–1954 gg.</i> IV: Arcixovskij, A.V., and V.I. Borkovskij. 1958b. <i>Iz raskopov 1955 g.</i> V: Arcixovskij, A.V., and V.I. Borkovskij. 1963. <i>Iz raskopov 1956–1957 gg.</i> VI: Arcixovskij, A.V. 1963. <i>Iz raskopov 1958–1961 gg.</i> VII: Arcixovskij, A.V., and V.L. Janin. 1978. <i>Iz raskopov 1962–1976 gg.</i> VIII: Janin, V.L., and A.A. Zaliznjak. 1986. <i>Iz raskopov 1977–1983 gg. Kommentarii i slovoukazatel' k berestjanyx gramotam (iz raskopov 1951–1983 gg.)</i> . IX: Janin, V.L., and A.A. Zaliznjak. 1993. <i>Iz raskopov 1984–1989 gg.</i> X: Janin, V.L., and A.A. Zaliznjak. 2000. <i>Iz raskopov 1990–1996 gg. Paleografija berestjanyx gramot i ix vnestratigrafičeskoe datirovanie</i> . XI: Janin, V.L., A.A. Zaliznjak, and A.A. Gippius. 2004. <i>Iz raskopov 1997–2000 gg.</i> XII: Janin, V.L., A.A. Zaliznjak, and A.A. Gippius. 2015. <i>Iz raskopov 2001–2014 gg.</i>
N+[NUMBER]	Number of birchbark document from Novgorod.

## Other

GVNP	Valk, S.N. ed. 1949. <i>Gramoty Velikogo Novgoroda i Pskova</i> . Moskva-Leningrad.
HUB	Höhlbaum, K., et al. 1876–1939. <i>Hansisches Urkundenbuch</i> . Vols. 1–II. Halle.
NPL	Nasonov, A.N. ed. 1950. <i>Novgorodskaja pervaja letopis' staršego i mladšego izvodov</i> . Moskva-Leningrad. Reprint with supplements: Moskva 2000. Also available online at <a href="http://www.lrc-lib.ru/rus_letopisi/Novgorod/contents.htm">http://www.lrc-lib.ru/rus_letopisi/Novgorod/contents.htm</a> .
PSRL	<i>Polnoe sobranie russkix letopisej. I: Lavrent'evskaja letopis'. Vyp. 1:</i>

*Povest' vremennyx let*. 1926. 2nd ed. Leningrad. Reprint with supplements: Moskva 1997. Also available online at [http://www.lrc-lib.ru/rus\\_letopisi/Laurence/contents.htm](http://www.lrc-lib.ru/rus_letopisi/Laurence/contents.htm).

SJS Kurz, J., and Z. Hauptová, eds. 1958–. *Slovník jazyka staroslověnského*, Praha.

SRJa XI–XVII Krivko, R.N. ed. 1975–. *Slovar' russkogo jazyka XI–XVII vv.* Moskva.

# Notes on Translation, Transliteration, Terminology, and References

The birchbark documents to be discussed in this book are numbered according to the standard editions (DND and the NGB volumes). The letter ‘N’ before a number stands for Novgorod as the city of excavation.

A birchbark document is called (*berestjanaja*) *gramota* in Russian, a loanword from Greek (*grammata* ‘letters [of the alphabet]’), which is actually used by the writers themselves in the sense of ‘letter, message’; see, for instance, N954, where we find *gramota* in the opening formula (‘A letter from Žiročko ...’) and the older variant *gramata* in the text itself (‘a letter from the other side’). In English, I will mainly use the neutral terms ‘(birchbark) document’ and ‘(birchbark) text’ interchangeably, and, if appropriate, also the term ‘(birchbark) letter’. Or I will simply speak of ‘birchbark’, as is sometimes done on birchbark (*beresto*) itself; see, for instance, N1004, which concludes with the words *so berestomo* ‘with the letter’.

Opening formulas may contain different words, including words referring to the act of bowing down: *poklonъ*, *poklanjanie*, *čelobitъ*, *čelomъ bitъ*. All these terms have been translated as ‘a bow’, although they might have had slightly different connotations, partly depending on the period and context in which they were used. For instance, the beginning of both letters N354 and N358, which Oncifor Lukinič wrote to his mother, is translated as ‘a bow’, whereas the original reads *čelomъ bitъ* in the case of N354 and *poklonъ* in N358.<sup>1</sup>

The English translations of the documents have been prepared in collaboration with Daniel E. Collins and Simeon Dekker. They are based on the standard editions, which include translations into Modern Russian. Brackets and (three) dots in the English translations are used as follows:

- (TEXT) indicates text that is not in the original, but has been added to clarify the translation
- (...) indicates text (of unspecified length) that can be read, but is not quoted
- [TEXT] indicates text that is read (reconstructed) on the basis of ambiguous visible information
- [...] indicates text (of unspecified length) that cannot be established due to damage of the piece of birchbark

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1 See further the comments on N477 (Section II.4).

Old Slavic names and terms are transliterated according to modern practice, unless peculiarities in the original spelling need to be pointed out for a better understanding of the text. Most importantly, it should be noted that *ě* is transliterated as *e*; *ь* as ' (apostrophe); and that *ѣ* is deleted (thus, *Xoten* for *Xotěně*, *Sven* for *Svěně*, *Flar* for *Flarь*, *rezana* for *rězana*, *deža* for *děža*, etc.).

Throughout this book I will use the term 'medieval Russia(n)'. In other scholarly works, the equivalent historical designations '(Kievan) Rus' and 'Rus'ian' can be found. I prefer the common term 'medieval Russia' to the more specialized name 'Rus', although it should be acknowledged explicitly that the Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Russian people all share the heritage of Rus'.

As far as the bibliography in this work is concerned, all the birchbark letters discussed include basic references to the standard editions in the NGB volumes and DND. DND (862–867) provides further references to literature on individual birchbark documents, which is mainly in Russian.

In the other references, I have made a special effort to include secondary literature in English and other Western European languages. These works may not always reflect the present state of the field accurately, but I believe it is important to offer a wide range of scholarly investigations and interpretations, which are accessible to a larger audience. As already mentioned in the Preface, the unique corpus of birchbark documents should be more widely known and studied.

**PART I**

***Writing on Birchbark***





# Historical and Geographical Context

This chapter provides a brief overview of the historical setting that is relevant for the study of birchbark letters.<sup>1</sup> It includes major events in the history of medieval Novgorod and their background, both internal (political organization and social strata) and external (especially warfare and trade relations).

## 1.1 The Origins and Early History of Novgorod

The origins of the city of Novgorod are somewhat unclear. The first records of Novgorod are encountered in the oldest East Slavic chronicles under the year 859 or 862.<sup>2</sup> Not much can be said about the period prior to these records. It is generally held that the area was inhabited by various tribes; these are sometimes specified as Slovene, Kriviči (both of these are Slavic tribes), and Finno-Ugrians (Čud'). These claims about the identity of the tribes are, however, quite speculative and controversial.<sup>3</sup>

Equally doubtful is the way in which the Varangian (the Slavic name for the Vikings) Prince Rjurik was 'invited' to rule over the three tribes, in order to avoid internal power struggles.<sup>4</sup> In any case, the chronicles report that Rjurik first settled at Lake Ladoga and soon moved to a location at the source of the Volxov River, where Novgorod is situated (see Figure 2). The dynasty that

1 This overview is based on a number of authoritative monographs and collections of articles, including Janin (1981; 2001a; 2003; 2008a; 2009a; see also 2008b and Janin et al. 2007 for articles in English), Birnbaum (1981; 1996a), Martin (1986; 2007, with many references to Novgorod throughout the book; 2008), Mühle (1991), Rybina (2001; 2009a), Brisbane and Gaimster (2001), Franklin (2002), Skvajrs and Ferdinand (2002), Angermann and Friedland (2002), Brisbane and Hather (2007), Skvajrs (Squires 2009), Brisbane et al. (2012a), Lukin (2018).

2 The most important chronicles are the First Novgorod Chronicle (*Novgorodskaja pervaja letopis'*; edition in NPL) and the Primary Chronicle (*Povest' vremennyx let*; main edition based on the Laurentian manuscript in PSRL 1). The latter is available in an English translation by Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzor (1953). The First Novgorod Chronicle has been translated into English by Michell and Forbes (1914) and into German by Dietze (1971).

3 One should bear in mind that the chronicles as they have come down to us (in copies from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries) were compiled in the early twelfth century, which is long after the described events of 859/862.

4 Birnbaum calls Rjurik "at best [...] a semi-legendary figure of early Russian history" (1981, 20).





FIGURE 2 Plan of Novgorod showing the five boroughs, the street layout, and the excavation sites.

Note: The street layout shows medieval streets in gray and the modern pattern in black; black blocks represent the excavation sites, including the Nerev and Trinity Excavations (after Janin et al. 2007, 8; Rybina 2009b, 78–79; Brisbane et al. 2012a, xx).

was founded by Rjurik lasted until 1598. By legend, their royal residence was at Gorodišče, a few kilometers to the south of Novgorod, and later, especially from the twelfth century, it served as the residence of Novgorodian princes who were banned from the city. In 882, according to the chronicles, a certain Oleg, along with Rjurik's son and successor Igor', left Novgorod and captured Kiev.

The earliest archaeological evidence for the existence of Novgorod dates from around 910. Novgorod developed into a proper town only after this date, when Igor's wife, Princess Ol'ga of Kiev, expanded its territory. Thanks to the increase in tax revenues, the town started to prosper and its new center, the citadel or kremlin (locally called *Detinec*), emerged. It is only from this point onwards that information is more readily available and consistent.

Shortly after Vladimir I of Kiev (grandson of Igor' and Ol'ga) was baptized in 988 (the traditional date of Christianization of the East Slavic world), Ioakim was consecrated as the first bishop of Novgorod in 989. This can be seen as the beginning of institutionalized Christianity in the Novgorodian lands. As will be explained in more detail in Section 1.3, there is no reason to assume that writing was used in pre-Christian times; this technique was brought to Novgorod simultaneously with the introduction of Christianity.

The further spread of literacy in Novgorod goes hand in hand with the city's development into the center of a vast empire. The first territorial expansion occurred in 1034 (the annexation of Pskov), and this process continued until the fifteenth century. The actual city was also extended; in the years 1045–1050, the St. Sophia cathedral was built within the citadel, which itself had been rebuilt as a larger-scale fortress in 1044.

The city of Novgorod (see Figure 2) is split into two halves by the Volxov River, which begins at Lake Il'men', south of the city, and empties into Lake Ladoga, two hundred kilometers to the north. From Lake Ladoga, one can sail westwards along the Neva River to the Gulf of Finland, where St. Petersburg is situated today, and into the Baltic Sea (see Figure 3).

Within the city, the left bank of the Volxov is called the Sophia Side (*Sofijskaja storona*), named after the cathedral in the citadel. The Sophia Side contains three of the five 'Ends' (*koncy*) or boroughs of the medieval city—the Nerev End (*Nerevskij konec*) in the north; the Ljudin End (*Ljudin konec*) in the south; and between them the Zagorodskij End (*Zagorodskij konec*, literally, 'the End beyond the citadel'). The right bank of the Volxov is called the Trade (or Market) Side (*Torgovaja storona*), and contains the remaining two boroughs—the Slavno End (*Slavenskij konec*) in the south; and the Carpenters' End (*Plotnickij konec*) in the north.

It is sometimes assumed that what would later become known as Novgorod was initially not a single town. It rather consisted of three separate settlements, which were to form the basis of the later administrative division of Novgorod into Ends, viz. Slavno, Nerev, and Ljudin. On the basis of their respective names, each of these original settlements is often associated with a particular tribe, most importantly Slovene, Nereva (Finno-Ugrians), and, more speculatively, Kriviči (designated as *ljudi* 'people'). During the period of birchbark literacy, they had their own local councils and contributed to the overall governance of the city. In some eras, there was active—at times, even violent—rivalry between them. This is illustrated, for instance, by birchbark letter N954, in which the two authors express dismay that one of their neighbors has shamed their borough by committing bestiality in another (see Section 11.5).

The Trade Side was the commercial center of the city. Here, in a bend of the river, the water flows more gently, so ships could pull out of the current

to unload their wares. Beside this natural harbor stood the market place, as well as the seasonal ‘courts’ (residences and warehouses) allotted to traders visiting from Scandinavia (the Gotenhof; see N488, Section 11.9) and Germany. The German trading complex, called Peterhof (locally known as *Nemeckij dvor* ‘German court’), was built at the end of the twelfth century. Later, a Hansa *kontor* was opened in Peterhof. This resulted in a largely autonomous, parallel society of Low German traders with their own law code, which has survived in the so-called Novgorod *Schra*.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2 Internal Organization

The Trade Side is also where the *veče* (people’s assembly) gathered. The significance of the *veče* has often been greatly exaggerated and romanticized. The myth of a fully-fledged democracy still persists in some present-day Russian historiography. In practice, however, members of the local aristocracy (known as boyars) had substantially more power than the *veče*.<sup>6</sup> At a yet higher level there was the *posadnik* (mayor) of the city, who was elected from among the boyars by the *veče* and usually served a term of two years. Originally the prince’s deputy, by 1100 his position had changed and the roles of prince (*knjaz’*) and *posadnik* were practically reversed. It was then the latter’s duty to control the prince, whose power was largely nominal and whose decisions had to be sanctioned by the *posadnik*. The role of the *posadnik* thus changed from protecting the prince’s interests over against Novgorod to safeguarding the Novgorodians’ interests over against the prince.

Names on birchbark can sometimes be related to *posadniks* directly, but often their identity has been inferred by circumstantial reasoning, with varying degrees of plausibility.<sup>7</sup> To date, more than twenty *posadniks* have been identified in approximately sixty-five birchbark documents. In the pre-Mongolian

5 On trade and commerce in medieval Novgorod in general, see Mühle (1991, 133–153; 1994; 2003), Birnbaum (1996a, 153–165), Noonan and Kovalev (2000), Rybina (2001), Kovalev (2015). For Novgorod’s relationship with Western Europe and the Hansa, see Angermann and Friedland (2002), Rybina (2009a), Burkhardt (2015), Skvajrs (Squires 2015a; 2015b; 2015c); also Skvajrs and Ferdinand (2002), and Skvajrs (Squires 2009), who discuss aspects of language contact between Novgorod and the Hansa. The main edition of the Novgorod *Schra* was published by Schlüter (1911; see also Rybina 2009a, 273–298).

6 For a summary of the role of the *veče*, see Lukin (2014; 2016); for a comprehensive treatment, see Lukin (2018).

7 See Janin (2003) for a comprehensive treatment of Novgorodian *posadniks*.

period (from around 1100 until the early thirteenth century)<sup>8</sup> we find: Gjurjata Rogovič,<sup>9</sup> Mikula<sup>10</sup> and his sons Petr (Petrilo) Mikul'čič<sup>11</sup> and Konstantin (Kosnjatin) Mikul'čič,<sup>12</sup> Ivan (Ivanko) Pavlovič,<sup>13</sup> Jakun (Jakša) Miroslavič (grandson of Gjurjata Rogovič),<sup>14</sup> Zaxar'ja,<sup>15</sup> Miroška Nesdinič,<sup>16</sup> and Gjurgij Ivankovič.<sup>17</sup>

Between the early fourteenth century and the second half of the fifteenth century, we first encounter the following members of the Mišiniči dynasty (see Section III.5.7), who served as *posadnik*: Varfolomej Jur'evič,<sup>18</sup> his son Matfej Varfolomeevič Kozka,<sup>19</sup> his grandson Oncifor Lukinič,<sup>20</sup> two of his great-grandsons, Jurij Onciforovič<sup>21</sup> and Aleksandr Ignat'evič,<sup>22</sup> and Samson Ivanovič (grandson of Vasilij, who was Aleksandr Ignat'evič's brother).<sup>23</sup> Further, in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: Fedor Timofeevič,<sup>24</sup> Esif Zaxar'inič (with the nickname *Nos*, i.e., 'the Nose'),<sup>25</sup> either Ivan Aleksandrovič or

8 See also Janin (2003, 166–174).

9 See N907.

10 See N109.

11 N88 (fn. 37 below), and also N336 (DND 284–285; NGB XII, 226).

12 See N241 and N397.

13 See N586, N736, N907, N88 (fn. 37 below), and also N633 (DND 288; NGB XII, 253–255), N897 (DND 265), N903 (DND 265); see further Section III.5.2.

14 See N999, and also N627 (DND 324–325), N812 (DND 320), N821 (DND 319–320), N870 (DND 316), N885 (DND 316–317), N890 (DND 322), N1015 (NGB XII, 114); see further Section III.5.3. See N724, and also N824 (DND 367); perhaps also N667 (DND 367, 388).

16 See N502, N603, N936, and also N226 (DND 409; NGB XII, 215); perhaps also N601 (DND 424–425) and Staraja Russa 17 (DND 446); see further Section III.5.4.

17 N165 (DND 378–379), N222 (DND 442–443; NGB XII, 214), N225 (DND 379; NGB XII, 215), N239 (DND 380; NGB XII, 216).

18 N391 (DND 512).

19 N5 (DND 535–536), N65 (DND 536), N146 (DND 535; NGB XII, 208).

20 See N354, N358, and also N98 (DND 553), N99 (DND 552–553), N101 (DND 554), N180 (DND 554), N385 (DND 554; NGB XII, 234), N594 (DND 554); perhaps also N102 (DND 555–556).

21 See N370, and also N94 (DND 592–593; NGB XII, 205), N97 (DND 593), N167 (DND 591–592; NGB XII, 208–209; Schaeken 2017a, 129, fn. 16), N273 (DND 593), N362 (DND 592; NGB XII, 230), N446 (DND 590); perhaps also N1075 (see Section III.4, fn. 14) and N1079, in which Jurij is one of the four addressees—along with Mixei, Fedor, and Esif—of a letter from Smen and Moisej (see Gippius et al. 2017, 11–14); cf. N301 (DND 666–667), in which Jurij's son Mixail Jur'evic is specifically mentioned as the '*posadnik*'s son.'

22 N314 (DND 627–628); see also N352 (DND 671; NGB XII, 230), a letter 'to Oleksandrovič, the *posadnik*'s son.'

23 N932 (DND 676–677; NGB XII, 28–29).

24 Probably figuring in N1079 (Gippius et al. 2017, 11–14).

25 N937 (DND 634; Dubrovin 2010, 119; NGB XII, 35); perhaps also N1079 (Gippius et al. 2017, 11–14; see below, Section I.1.3).

Ivan Lukinič Ščoka,<sup>26</sup> Andrej Ivanovič,<sup>27</sup> Jakov Fedorovič,<sup>28</sup> Boris Vasil'evič,<sup>29</sup> and Vasilij Esifovič (Esif Zaxar'inič's son, also *Nos*).<sup>30</sup>

In addition to these names of Novgorodian *posadniks*, we also encounter *posadniks* from other places, such as Ladoga (Raguil Dobrynin),<sup>31</sup> Toržok (Foma Dobroškinič),<sup>32</sup> and the Dvina lands (Oksentij).<sup>33</sup> Finally, there are some birchbark letters in which a *posadnik* appears without any further identification.<sup>34</sup>

At least formally, the boyars were under the authority of the prince and accountable to the *veče*. Whereas the *veče* is not mentioned anywhere in the birchbark corpus, the prince appears quite frequently, although almost exclusively in pre-Mongolian texts.<sup>35</sup> In reality, however, neither of these had much influence over them, so that the boyars were in fact the 'men in power'; the political system was oligarchic rather than democratic.

Novgorod's political history can be divided into four periods.<sup>36</sup> The later periods witness a steady decline in the prince's authority. In the first period (the 970s to 1136), the prince still has a relatively high degree of power, though formally dependent on Kiev (see below, Section 1.1.3). The second period (1136–1238/40) marks the beginning of the Novgorodian Republic, and independence from Kiev. In 1136 the Novgorodians deposed Prince Vsevolod Mstislavič.<sup>37</sup> The office of prince continued to exist, but it became more of a ceremonial po-

26 N933 (DND 675; NGB XII, 29–31; Schaeken 2017a, 128). N933 is an instruction from '*posadnik* Ivan', who might be either Ivan Aleksandrovič (died 1417) or Ivan Lukinič Ščoka (elected 1438).

27 N310 (DND 670).

28 N302 (DND 679; NGB XII, 222–223).

29 See N43 and N49.

30 See N519/520.

31 Raguil Dobrynin is the addressee of N831 (Section 1.4).

32 N671 (DND 420–421).

33 See N918.

34 See, for instance, N154, N605, and N704.

35 See, for instance, N88 (fn. 37 below), N155, N286, N603, N724, N745, N794, N850, N872, N950 (fn. 38 below).

36 See Birnbaum (1981, 44).

37 A new reconstruction of N88, dating from the period ca. 1120–1140, provides us with the opening formula of the letter: 'From the prince to Ivan and to Petrila.' On the basis of information from the chronicles, 'the prince' can be identified as Prince Vsevolod Mstislavič. The addressees of N88 are the leaders of two rival boyar clans from different parts of the city: Ivan (Ivanko) Pavlovič (Ljudin End) and Petr (Petrilo) Mikul'čič (Nerev End). See NGB XII (201–205, including a new drawing of the birchbark; cf. Schaeken 2017a, 127) and also Gippius (2009b).

sition and was located outside the city limits, in nearby Gorodišče.<sup>38</sup> Subsequent princes were 'invited' from other principalities, under the supervision of the *veče*. The prince had to share his power with the *posadnik*, and the *veče* acquired a greater role in passing legislation. In addition, the ruling elite of the city consisted of two other high officials with administrative responsibilities, viz. the *tysjackij* (chiliarch, originally a military leader of 1000 soldiers),<sup>39</sup> and the bishop and archbishop,<sup>40</sup> whose office included judicial duties.

In the third period (1238/40–1387), princely power was declining still further in favor of the boyars. The last period (1387–1478) witnesses a steady decline of the Mongol-Tatar regime, and connected with that the ascendancy of Moscow. At the same time, this involves a continuous weakening of Novgorod, which by now was trying to define its position between the emerging (and mutually hostile) powers of Muscovy and Lithuania.

Among the cities of medieval Russia, prior to the Mongol-Tatar invasion, Novgorod was second only to Kiev in population and prestige. At its height, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the population of Novgorod is estimated to have been twenty to thirty thousand.<sup>41</sup> The internal composition of the population was diverse, and not everyone was equally benefited by the city's booming economy. Apart from the boyars, the city's elite was made up of wealthy merchants. Then there were peasant farmers on the outskirts of the city, clergy of various ranks, and slaves. Henrik Birnbaum concludes that the

38 There is only one birchbark text from Gorodišče, which was found in 2003 and labeled both as N950 and Gorodišče no. 1 (see DND 274; Nosov 2007, 36–37; NGB XII, 44–45). The very fragmentary letter is dated to the early twelfth century and makes reference to the prince ('... (you?) should give the prince ...').

39 As the Flemish traveler and diplomat Ghillebert de Lannoy observed in 1413 in his *Voyages et Ambassades* about the leadership of Novgorod: "[T]hey have two officers, one duke and one burgrave, who rule the city and are replaced every year" (cited after Mund 2002a, 119; see also Goetz 1916, 17). The *tysjackij* is referred to by 'duke' (*duc*) and the *posadnik* by 'burgrave' (*bourchgrave*). Quite often the same person could hold both offices during his lifetime, like Vasilij Esifovič, for instance, who appears in N519/520 (Section 11.3); he was the *tysjackij* between 1405 and 1416, and immediately afterwards became the *posadnik* (see Section 1.1.3).

40 On birchbark we find the Greek loanword *episkop̃/piskup̃* 'bishop' (cf. N247) and the loan translation from Greek (*despotes*, literally 'ruler') *vladyka* (cf. N155 and N725). In N963 (Section 11.7), the term *vladyka* appears in alternation with the loanword *arxiepiskup̃* 'archbishop'.

41 In the vast Novgorodian lands, the population may have numbered around four hundred thousand in the fifteenth century. At the end of the twelfth century, the population of the city is estimated at fifteen thousand. See Lukin (2014, 478, 482–483, with further references).

number of slaves in Novgorod must have been quite considerable.<sup>42</sup> However, commoners vastly outnumbered the other social classes; they were distinct from the merchants and engaged in smaller business and crafts.

### 1.3 External Relations

Initially, Novgorod was one of the principalities within medieval Russia. This confederation of East Slavic cities and tribes stretched from the Black Sea to the White Sea. Gradually, from the twelfth century onwards, the influence of the grand prince of Kiev declined, and the individual regions became more influential. Novgorod became effectively independent, although Kiev remained the main trade partner in the south.

The history of Novgorod is dotted with armed conflicts. Apart from the occasional fighting with rival tribes, numerous wars were fought against foreign powers. Strictly speaking, Novgorod was not directly affected by the Mongol-Tatar yoke that oppressed many of the principalities in the thirteenth century. The attacks began in 1223 and increased in intensity from 1237 onwards, until Kiev finally fell in 1240. Due to sparse food supplies, the Tatars were brought to a halt about a hundred kilometers from Novgorod (in 1238); they withdrew, never to return, though a large part of the East Slavic lands remained under the 'Tatar yoke' until 1480.

However, the Tatars were by no means the only threat from outside. The Swedes and the Teutonic Knights (both designated as 'Germans' in the chronicles) were a continuous concern in the early thirteenth century, until the Novgorodian Prince Aleksandr Nevskij defeated them in, respectively, 1240 and 1242.

The fall of Novgorod, which was in fact a takeover by Moscow under Ivan III (1478), was not so much a sudden conquest as the culmination of a gradual decline in its economic significance. Ever since the end of the Mongol-Tatar invasion, Moscow had been gaining ascendancy over the other cities and lands of medieval Russia. The siege that occurred in 1478 was the death blow to Novgorod as an independent city. After its incorporation into Muscovy, it relapsed into a provincial town of only marginal importance. In 1494, Ivan III ordered the closure of the Hansa office. Ivan IV (the Terrible) was more rigorous, and in 1570 under his leadership Novgorod was plundered and depopulated, due to suspicions of treason. This is already beyond the time frame of the birchbark letters.

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<sup>42</sup> Birnbaum (1996a, 86–87).

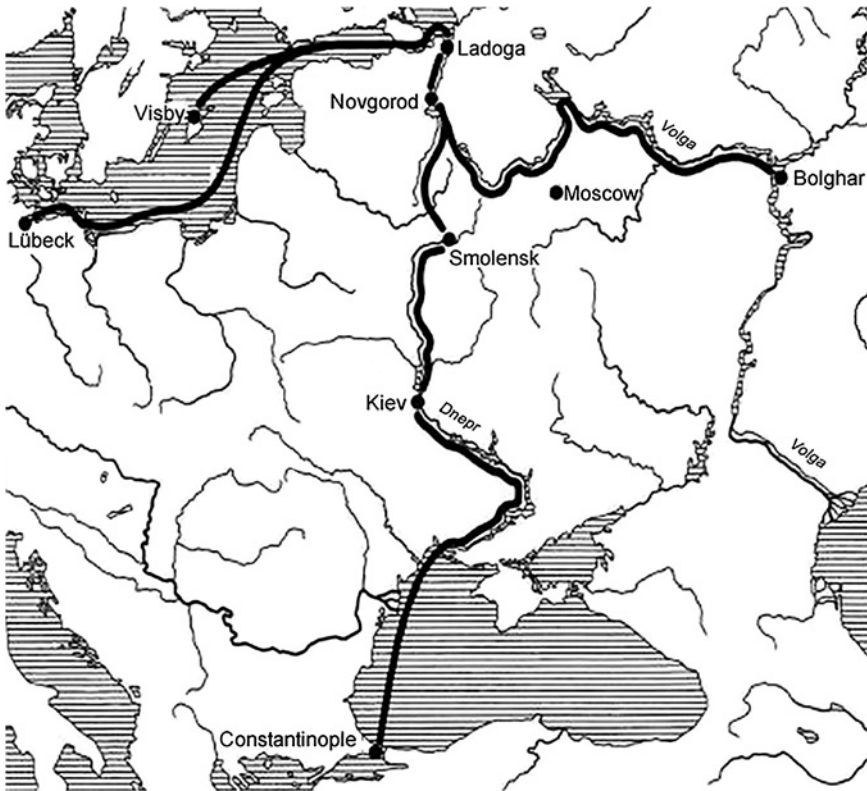


FIGURE 3 Major trade routes of Novgorod.

Note: The map shows a North-South waterway, including the Dnieper River (the so-called route 'from the Varangians to the Greeks'), and an East-West route, from the Volga River to the Baltic Sea (after Rybina 2009a, 30).

The relations between Novgorod and foreign lands (beyond the medieval Russian territories) can, apart from warfare, best be described in terms of trade. Novgorod rose to power and prosperity because of its ideal location on major river routes connecting the Baltic and the Black Sea and the Volga River with the Caspian Sea and the Silk Road (see Figure 3). Byzantine and Asian luxury goods, such as silk, jewelry, wine, and glass, made their way through Novgorod to Scandinavia and Northern Europe, while Novgorod exported its own wax, honey, and especially fur, from the most precious sable to the cheapest squirrel skin (see N722, Section 11.2)—aptly called 'treasures of the land of darkness' by J. Martin on the basis of Islamic literature.<sup>43</sup> These

43 Martin (1986); see also Makarov (2012).



goods were not produced in the city itself, although there was some manufacturing there;<sup>44</sup> rather, they were acquired as taxes from settlers and as tribute from indigenous peoples in the Novgorodian hinterlands (see, for instance, N136, Section II.4). Especially German merchants of the Novgorodian office of the Hanseatic League (Peterhof, see below) played an important role in organizing the fur trade: they sorted the fur, bound it in bundles of forty pelts,<sup>45</sup> and arranged its further shipment to Western Europe, especially Bruges.

Many European merchants visited Novgorod every year, and the Novgorodians actively traded their goods for Western products, such as silver and other metals, linen, woven fabrics, amber, weapons and other wrought goods, salt, preserved fish, wine, and also grain. Moreover, like Sadko, a legendary Russian travelling merchant and hero who figures in the so-called *byliny* (epic poems that stem from an oral narrative tradition), some Novgorodian merchants travelled vast distances in the interests of trade; for example, one mentioned in N1009 (Section II.2) is said to deal in 'Greek' wares, i.e., imports from the Byzantine Empire or its colonies on the Black Sea, as well as merchandise from 'overseas', that is, from Northern Europe. Medieval graffiti with markedly Old Novgorodian spelling and language can be found on the marble walls and balustrades of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, the most revered church of the Byzantine Empire and therefore an irresistible lure for Orthodox visitors from abroad (see further below, Section I.6).

Hanseatic treaties with Novgorod from the late twelfth century and later have been preserved. Some of the Novgorodian representatives named in these documents are also mentioned in birchbark letters. For instance, the oldest treaty of 1191–1192 (between Novgorod, Gotland and the German Cities) mentions Miroška Nesdinič, a prominent boyar, who served as the city's *posadnik* from 1189 to 1204, and was the author of N502 (Section II.3).<sup>46</sup>

44 On evidence from birchbark documents of craft production in medieval Novgorod, see Rybina (2012).

45 Martin (1986, 65), Kovalev (2003), Noonan and Kovalev (2004). A bundle of forty pelts was called a *sorok*, which in Modern Russian is the word for the numeral 40 (Fasmer 1987 III, 722–723).

46 See Goetz (1916, 17), GVNP (55–56), Janin (1991, 81; 2003, 507), Gippius (2004b, 174–179), Rybina (2009a, 45–46). As noted above (Section I.1.2), Miroška Nesdinič appears in several birchbark documents, including N936, written by Ivan, and is a member of the network of Miroška and Olisej Grečin (see Section III.5.4) as well as the Luka-Ivan network (Section III.5.5). This text can be related to N935 (ca. 1180–1200), which belongs not only to the same network of Miroška and Olisej Grečin but also to the Jakim network (also Section III.5.5). N935 consists of a list of persons, including a certain Griga, a name that rarely occurs on birchbark. In the 1191–1192 treaty a Russian envoy called Griga is men-

A second example is a long Middle Low German document of 1331, in which German merchants report to Riga about several conflicts with the Novgorodians.<sup>47</sup> Among the citizens mentioned we find 'Matphe Coseken'. This Matphe can be identified as the *posadnik* Matfej Varfolomeevič Kozka, who held office between ca. 1332 and 1345, and appears not only in the First Novgorod Chronicle,<sup>48</sup> but also several times in birchbark letters (all dating from the first half of the fourteenth century).<sup>49</sup> His son, Ignat Matfeevič, might be the same Ignat who is mentioned at the end of N363 (see Section 11.5).

A final example concerns Esif Zaxar'inič and his son Vasilij Esifovič, both nicknamed 'the Nose'. Esif was the *posadnik* during the period 1388–1409, while Vasilij was in office from 1416 onwards, after serving as the *tysjackij* between 1405 and 1416.<sup>50</sup> As mentioned above, fn. 25, Esif appears in N937 (ca. 1380–1400), which is a letter 'From Jur'i to Nos, I have sent with Mixalka a hundred baskets [...]'.<sup>51</sup> He might also be one of the addressees named Esif in N1079 (end of fourteenth or beginning of fifteenth century), although another possible candidate is the *posadnik* Esif Falaleevič.<sup>52</sup> His son Vasilij appears in Moisej's testament, N519/520, dated ca. 1400–1410 (see Section 11.3).<sup>53</sup> We know both *posadniks* from several Hanseatic pieces of correspondence with Novgorod. For instance, a letter of 1405 from Novgorod to Jur'ev (Dorpat) on the reinforcement of the so-called Niebur treaty of 1392 is preserved in two versions and was sent 'van dem borchgreven Gesepa Sagaravitza, van dem hertogen Wassili Gesevite' and others (version A).<sup>54</sup> Thus, in the year 1405 Esif

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tioned at the beginning of the document: 'I (Prince Jaroslav Vladimirovič) have sent my envoy Griga to (conclude) these terms.' This Griga might be the same person as in N935 (see Schaeken 2017a, 128).

47 Latest edition (Middle Low German original text and Russian translation) by Lukin (2018, 545–557).

48 See Popov (1958), Janin (2003, 255). According to Lukin (2018, 352), the identity of the other Novgorodians mentioned by name in the 1331 document cannot be established with certainty. However, there is good reason to assume that a person called Thyrentekey might be identified with Terentij Koj, who appears in N261–264, which is a list of donors of wedding gifts (see Schaeken 2018, and Section 11.2, fn. 4).

49 See above, fn. 19.

50 Janin (1981, 177; 2003, 502, 504).

51 DND (634), Dubrovin (2010, 119), NGB XII (35). See also Schaeken et al. (2014, 24), Dekker (2018, 119).

52 Gippius et al. (2017, 11–14); cf. Janin (2003, 297–298, 504).

53 Janin (2003, 321–324, 502).

54 GVNp (85–86), Janin (1991, 98). Version B reads: 'van des borchgreven wegene Jesiff unde van des hertogen wegen Wassili Jesive syn sone.' At the end of this version we find the addition *Dessen bref Wassili Uze* [sic] *de borchgreve unde de hertoge Jesife Sacharniti* 'This

Zaxar'inič represented Novgorod in the function of *posadnik* (commonly described as 'borchgreve' in Middle Low German sources) and his son Vasilij Esifovič in the function of *tysjackij* ('hertoge'). This corresponds exactly with the reconstructed data from the chronicles and is confirmed in other Hanseatic documents.<sup>55</sup>

By the fourteenth century, the Hanseatic League, originally a trading union between German cities, had developed a pan-European trade network. From 1370 onwards, Novgorod was one of the four cities with a so-called *kontor* (on the Trade Side). Although Novgorod did not belong to the core network and was not a Hanseatic city in the strict sense of the term, the *kontor* in Peterhof ensured that Novgorod was one of the largest foreign trading posts of the Hanseatic League. This testifies to the importance possessed by Novgorod for the Hanseatic League. Conversely, the importance of the Hanseatic League for Novgorod was also considerable. Only merchants from Hanseatic cities had the right to live and do business in the Peterhof trading complex; they always tried to obtain a monopoly position, mainly at the expense of non-Hanseatic Dutch and Flemish traders. In spite of recurrent political tensions and international conflicts, during which the foreign merchants tended to leave the city, the Peterhof complex housed some 150–200 merchants at a time, who usually stayed for a period of one year.

The trading complex was the center of commerce not just for the city of Novgorod, but also for the vast territories that it controlled. At the height of Novgorodian power, its lands stretched two thousand kilometers from west to east (from present-day Estonia to the Siberian side of the Ural Mountains), and twelve hundred from north to south (from the top of the Kola Peninsula to approximately one hundred kilometers from Moscow).<sup>56</sup>

As mentioned above, Novgorod was not usurped by the Mongol-Tatar invaders. Nevertheless, the changed political situation in the rest of medieval Russia did have a profound impact on Novgorod as a trade center because the

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is the letter of the *posadnik* Vasilij Esif [fovič?] and the *tysjackij* Esif Zaxar'inič.' This seems to be a further clarification of the names 'Jesiff' and 'Wassili Jesive syn sone', i.e., Vasilij, son of Esif, mentioned at the very beginning of the text. Here, the functions of both individuals are precisely the other way around. The scribe of the additional note was probably led astray by the initial phrasing of the names of the father and the father's son.

55 For instance, a letter from Dorpat to Novgorod (1405), addressed to 'deme borghgreven Yesken Sacharienetzen', among others (HUB 5, 1899, 351–352); also a letter from the German merchants in Novgorod to Reval, i.e., present-day Tallinn (1409), in which we find 'hertoghe Wassyle Nosse' (HUB 5, 1899, 463–465). See further Janin (1991, 95–96, 99, 102, 107).

56 See the map of the Novgorodian lands around the year 1400 in Brisbane et al. (2012b, 3).

main trade routes towards the south and east were cut off. Economic life suffered greatly. This is also reflected in the lesser number of birchbark letters recovered from this period (see below, Section 1.3).

Over time, external relations with Byzantium were replaced by Novgorod's vast colonial hinterlands to the northeast. The emphasis of the birchbark letters also shifted from international trade towards internal administrative matters, such as taxation. Many birchbark letters have come down to us, especially from the fourteenth century, that deal with the collection of revenues by tax officials or stewards (see, for instance, N286, Section 11.8), or communication between peasants and landlords who lived in the city (for instance, N361, Section 11.4).

The above historical overview has provided us with the basic framework for an understanding of the society in which the birchbark letters emerged. In the next sections, their contents and use will be introduced in more detail. More specifically, the issues that will be addressed are archaeology, the technology of writing, the use of writing, and the role of writing in communication.

## Sites and Distribution

Figure 4 shows the cities where medieval birchbark letters have been discovered; the number following the name of each city refers to the number of birchbarks that have been found there. As of the end of 2018, the corpus of birchbark letters totals 1222 items, discovered in twelve cities, but this does not



FIGURE 4 Area of distribution of finds of birchbark documents (from 1951 to 2018).  
Note: Based on Schaeken (2012a, 20; 2017a, 126).

mean that there are 1222 different texts. Whenever archaeologists unearth a new piece of birchbark that has writing on it, they assign it a sequence number. However, it sometimes happens that two fragments excavated at different times and given separate numbers turn out to be pieces of a single text. This is the case, for example, with N562, found in 1977, and N607, found five years later, which were only reunited in 1992 (labeled as N607/562, see Section II.3).<sup>1</sup> There are also longer texts, written on more than one piece of birchbark, that have been assigned separate numbers—for instance, N519 and N520 (see N519/520, Section II.3). Conversely, there are some cases where a single piece of birchbark can contain multiple messages; thus, N736 has a letter from Ivan to Dristliv on one side (N736a), and Dristliv's reply on the other (N736b; see Section II.2).

Most of the birchbark letters have been found in present-day Russia, not only in Novgorod, but also in Staraja Russa (49 documents so far),<sup>2</sup> Toržok (19),<sup>3</sup> Smolensk (16),<sup>4</sup> Pskov (8),<sup>5</sup> Tver' (5),<sup>6</sup> Moscow (4),<sup>7</sup> Staraja Rjazan' (1),<sup>8</sup> and Vologda (1).<sup>9</sup> Three birchbarks have been found in Belarus (two in Mscis-

1 For other examples, see NGB X (3).

2 Published together with the texts from Novgorod: nos. 1–45 in Vols. VII–IX and XI–XII of NGB and some in DND; no. 46, found in 2016, in Gippius et al. (2017, 22–23); nos. 47–49, found in 2017 and 2018, have not yet been published. See also the online database with archaeological finds from Staraja Russa: <http://www.novsu.ru/archeology/db> (search for *Gramota berestjanaja* under *Kategorija*).

3 All published in NGB XI (120–137) and Malygin (2011). No. 14 from Toržok, a fragmentary business letter found on 9 August 2000, turned out to be the thousandth birchbark document unearthed in the territory of medieval Russia (NGB XI, 129–130; Malygin 2011, 66–67). Toržok 10 is treated below, Section III.3.

4 Smolensk 1 was found as early as 30 July 1952 (see Avdusin 1957, 248), only one year after the discovery of the first birchbark in Novgorod. See the editions in DND (nos. 2/3, 5/7, 9/8, 10, and 12; on nos. 9/8 and 12, see also NGB XII, 273); also Avdusin and Mel'nikova (1985: nos. 1–11) and Astašova and Zaliznjak (1998: nos. 12–15). The most recent birchbark find from Smolensk (no. 16 in 2009) has not yet been published. Smolensk 11 is treated below, Section II.9.

5 Some of them published in DND (nos. 4, 6, and 7; on nos. 6 and 7, see also Zaliznjak et al. 1993). Also Beleckij (1968, 6: Pskov 2), Labutina and Kostjučuk (1981: Pskov 3 and 4; cf. NGB IX, 178–179), Sedov et al. (1987: Pskov 5), Labutina and Kolosova (2003: Pskov 3–8). As far as I know, there is no edition of Pskov 1. Pskov 6 is treated below, Section II.2 (along with Pskov 3 in the accompanying fn. 14).

6 All published in DND (on Tver' 5, see also NGB XII, 273–274). Earlier publications by Žilina (1987: no. 1) and T.V. Roždestvenskaja (2001: nos. 3–5). Tver' 2 is treated below and Tver' 5 in Section II.4.

7 For Moscow 1, see Černov (1997); Moscow 3 has been published by Gippius et al. (2011).

8 To my knowledge, this has not been published.

9 See Kukuškin et al. (2017). Vologda, about six hundred kilometers northeast of Novgorod, is now the northernmost location where a birchbark document has been discovered (in 2015).

laŭ/Mstislavl' and one in Vicebsk/Vitebsk),<sup>10</sup> not far from the territories of the medieval Novgorodian state, while another three have been discovered far to the south, in the city of Zvenyhorod Halyc'kyj (Zvenigorod Galickij) in Ukraine.<sup>11</sup> Of the documents unearthed in Russia, the vast majority (viz. 1113, or more than ninety percent) have been found in various sites in Novgorod itself.<sup>12</sup> If one includes birchbarks written in other cities in the Novgorodian lands or in the same historical-linguistic region as Novgorod (Staraja Russa, Toržok, and initially also Pskov), the count comes to approximately 97% of the corpus. This raises the question of why so many birchbarks have been found in Novgorod (see Figure 5) or nearby regions, and whether the few that have been found elsewhere are oddities or the tip of an archaeological iceberg.

The point to bear in mind is that where no excavations are conducted, no birchbarks will be discovered. Novgorod is the only site where systematic excavations have taken place on a larger scale. In cities such as Smolensk, Staraja Russa, and Toržok, the archaeological fieldwork has been less extensive, which naturally lessens the chances of discovery. In other places, the finds have been mostly accidental; this was the case with the single birchbark discovered during construction work in Vitebsk in 1959,<sup>13</sup> and also the most recent letter from Moscow (no. 4), found in 2015 after the demolition of a large hotel adjoining Red Square. Because of the disparate nature of the excavations, there is no way to be certain how many birchbarks have gone undiscovered; in cities like Pskov and Smolensk, which were also of great commercial importance in the Middle Ages, the few tantalizing finds undoubtedly represent a tiny proportion of

10 Vitebsk 1 has been published in DND. For Mstislavl' 1, see L.V. Alekseev (1983). A second birchbark from Mstislavl' was found in 2014 and awaits publication.

11 Some of them published in DND (nos. 1 and 2; see also NGB XII, 274–275). For no. 3, which consists of merely a single letter and an anthropomorphic drawing, see Svješnykov (1990, 130–131). Zvenigorod 2 is treated below, Section III.4. Whereas the three documents were discovered in the late 1980s, there are some recent reports of two new birchbark finds (as well as a bone stylus) in Zvenigorod (Dovhan' 2009, 27–28, 44; Dzendzeljuk and L'oda 2009; Meľnyk 2011, 193). However, it appears that neither of the scrolls reveals any text.

12 With only a few exceptions, the Novgorodian birchbark letters are archived in the United Novgorod State Museum ([www.novgorodmuseum.ru](http://www.novgorodmuseum.ru)) and the State Historical Museum in Moscow ([www.shm.ru](http://www.shm.ru)). N266, which is part of N275/266+274 (ca. 1360–1380), is kept in the National Library in Paris (see DND 603) and, according to the database, N404 (ca. 1220–1240; DND 472–473) is now in the Matenadaran in Yerevan. The original of N13, which was found in 1952, has been lost and no photograph exists; the only information we have is a short note in NGB II (14), which says that the text is written in ink and has not yet been deciphered. Apparently, N13 belongs to the later period of birchbark writing (see NGB II, 9, and also NGB X, 146, where N13 is attributed to the time frame 1430–1450).

13 See Dročenina and Rybakov (1960, 282).

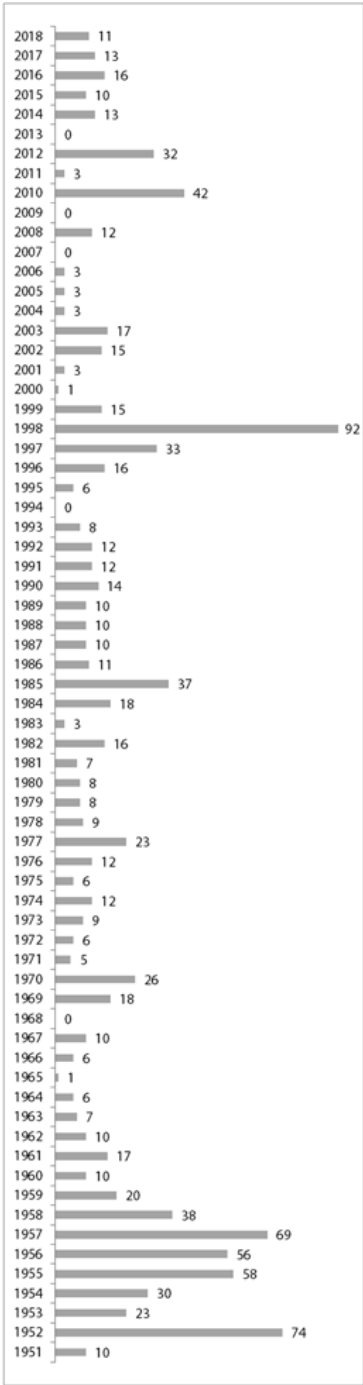


FIGURE 5  
Number of excavated birchbark documents per  
year in Novgorod (НІ-НІІІ3).



the birchbark letters that were actually written. Even in Novgorod, less than three percent of the medieval city has been systematically excavated; the head of the Novgorod Archaeological Expedition, V.L. Janin, estimates that more than 20,000 birchbarks remain to be discovered—most of them under modern buildings.<sup>14</sup>

The main factor to consider when estimating the number of birchbarks that may potentially have been preserved is the quality of the soil in a given region. In most types of soil, organic materials like birchbark tend to undergo rapid decomposition. By contrast, the soil in Novgorod and nearby regions is poor in oxygen and has a large proportion of clay, which retards the progress of decomposition. Moreover, the soil tends to remain moist year-round; covered organic materials are generally not subject to periods of alternating dampness and dryness—a condition that likewise inhibits decay. In Novgorod, the ‘cultural layers’ of organic and inorganic materials that reflect human settlement go down to a depth of more than eight meters; the earliest cultural layer dates from the first half of the tenth century.

Among the organic materials that have been preserved are bones, leather, wax, textiles, wood, and bark; among the inorganic are pottery, glass, iron, bronze and other metals, and worked stones. From the early 1930s onwards, the summer archaeological expeditions in Novgorod have yielded a genuine treasure trove of artifacts—lead seals; iron swords; glass jewelry and mirrors; slate spindle whorls; leather shoes and masks; birch containers and fishing bobbers; wooden tools, toys, dishes, furniture, and musical instruments; wax writing-tablets; and thousands of other artifacts that present a vivid and detailed picture of material culture in the medieval city, quite apart from the words of long-dead voices preserved in birchbark letters.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the fact that almost all birchbark finds come from Novgorod, there is no reason to think we are dealing with a narrowly localized writing tradition. As mentioned above, not all of the major political and cultural centers of medieval Russia have been excavated extensively, nor are the conditions as favorable for preservation as in Novgorod. The practice of writing on birchbark must have been known in other places. Many of the birchbarks found in Novgorod itself were sent to the city from outside. Especially in the earlier period, prior to the upheavals of the thirteenth century, letters could be sent to

14 Janin (2008a, 343: ‘no fewer than 20,000’; 2008b, 206: ‘at least 20,000’); cf. NGB VIII (10: ‘23,500’).

15 For a richly illustrated overview of various artifacts unearthed in Novgorod, see Kolčín et al. (1985). See also the online archaeological exhibition of the United Novgorod State Museum ([www.novgorodmuseum.ru](http://www.novgorodmuseum.ru)), which includes not only many photographs of birchbark documents, but also thousands of other objects that have been brought to light.

Novgorod over great distances, as in the case of N424, in which Gjurgij asks his parents to come ‘here, either to Smolensk or to Kiev’ (see Section 11.2), N745, sent to Novgorod by ‘Pavel from Rostov’ (Section 111.3), and N1004, brought to Novgorod by Goimer from Černigov—cities many hundreds of kilometers away (Section 111.3).

We also have letters from writers who came from other regions. Judging from his language, the writer of one of the oldest known birchbarks, N246 (Section 11.3), must have come from further to the west—from the Smolensk region or present-day eastern Belarus. The second birchbark letter found in Tver’, which lies outside the Novgorodian lands, was sent there from Toržok, a town that was under Novgorodian control:

A bow from Grigorij to Mother. Come to me as soon as possible, to Toržok; after putting your property in safekeeping, come to Toržok. (...)  
(Tver’ 2, ca. 1300–1320)<sup>16</sup>

It should be noted that communication on birchbark not only happened over long distances but also within the city itself. For instance, N1055 lacks the opening formula but reveals the location of the addressee:

(From X to Y) on Rozvad’s Street. Give the hide to Deacon Ostaf’ja and I will settle with you myself. I need the hide.  
(N1055, ca. 1260–1280)<sup>17</sup>

However, the letter was not found in the street of the recipient, which still exists (Rozvažā Street), on the Sophia Side, but on the other side, the Trade Side (at Carpenters’ End). Apparently, the letter was never sent or was brought back by the addressee after fulfilling the request of the sender, who lived on the Trade Side. For another example of a letter sent within the city of Novgorod, see N954 (Section 11.5), where it says: ‘(There has been) a letter from the other side (of the river).’

Some letters sent to Novgorod from outside explicitly ask for replies. At the end of N424 (see above), Grigorij, who is writing from the southwest, tells his parents, ‘If you don’t come (to Smolensk or Kiev), send me a note (saying) whether you are well.’ In N358 (Section 111.4), Oncifor Lukinič, who is clearly writing from somewhere outside the city, instructs his subordinate Nester to

<sup>16</sup> DND (567–569). See also Mendoza (2002, 307).

<sup>17</sup> NGB XII (156–157). See also Schaeken (2017a, 136).

write him 'a letter about the helmet'. In N422 (Section III.2), Mestjata, who is out of town on business, writes to some of his associates in Novgorod: 'If you need anything, send to me, and give (the messenger) a letter.' If all of the responses to these messages had been preserved and discovered in archaeological excavations, the extent and quantity of non-Novgorodian birchbark writing would be demonstrably greater.

There is also external evidence to prove that writing on birchbark was a widespread phenomenon. Chronicles from the fifteenth century and later explicitly mention the use of birchbark as a writing material, even though paper was already in extensive use. In more recent times, after paper had become the predominant writing material, birchbark could still be used when paper was not readily available; for example, there is a birchbark book of tribute records from eighteenth-century Siberia, and ethnographers have observed writing on birchbark among sectarians even in the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup>

Evidence also exists that birchbark could be used as a writing material in Scandinavia. In his *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (Rome, 1555), the Swedish chronicler Olaus Magnus notes that wood had once been used for writing. He further observes:

Moreover, as letters written on paper are now sent from one person to another, so once the natives of the North directed to each other letters incised on wood, since this was the best-known form of writing material. Indeed, even now, if paper runs out in military camps or cities under siege, they resort to using for their letters the bark or wood of a birch tree cut apart into slivers or, rather, into thin sheets; this they may do with greater peace of mind because bark of this sort is not spoilt by any damage from rain or snow.<sup>19</sup>

A birchbark from the second half of the fifteenth century is preserved in Vadstena Monastery in southern Sweden; it is a short note in Latin, written in ink and tipped into a paper manuscript.<sup>20</sup> Another birchbark from Sweden was found in Stockholm in 1989; it is dated to the fourteenth century and also contains a Latin text with traces of ink.<sup>21</sup> A third birchbark text of Scandinavian provenance was discovered in 2006 during archaeological excavations in

18 NGB V (9–10), Bulanin (1997, 148–149), Janin (1998, 33–34). There is even a little birchbark book that was written in 1991, consisting of texts by Old Believer peasant writers (see <https://www.wdl.org/en> and search for 'birch-bark book').

19 Foote (1996, 77).

20 NGB V (9), Odenius (1960), Janin (1998, 33), Harjula (2012a, 9).

21 Söderlund (2002), quoted in Harjula (2012a, 8–9).

Turku, on the southwest coast of Finland. Again, we are dealing with what appears to be a fourteenth-century text in Latin.<sup>22</sup> In all three instances, the contents suggest an ecclesiastical environment, similar to the Latin birchbark text that was unearthed in Novgorod (N488, see Section 11.9), which belongs to roughly the same period. Similarly, the only known text on birchbark of German provenance has a religious content, viz. the Prologue to the Gospel of John (1:1–14). It is written in Greek (cf. N552, Section 11.9) and dates from the second half of the fifteenth century. The author of this remarkable birchbark text is probably the German Benedictine and humanist Johannes Trithemius (1462–1516).<sup>23</sup>

In relation to the Scandinavian finds, it should be noted that one of the birchbarks found in Smolensk, southwest of Novgorod, seems to have a runic message in Old Norse from the middle of the twelfth century (Smolensk 11; see Section 11.9). In addition, more than a thousand kilometers to the southeast of Novgorod, fragments of a birchbark manuscript were discovered in 1930 in the Lower Volga region near Saratov; they contain messages in the Uyghur and Mongol languages and pertain to the Mongol-Tatar territory of the Golden Horde.<sup>24</sup>

The practice of writing on bark can also be found outside the northern and eastern parts of Europe. Pliny the Elder, in his *Naturalis Historia*, mentioned even then that “the bark of certain trees” was used by ancient authors for writing before papyrus became available.<sup>25</sup> Reflecting this practice, the Latin word *liber* ‘book’ is derived from a root denoting both ‘book’ and ‘bark’ (cf. Russian *lub* ‘bark’, which has the same linguistic derivation as *liber*).<sup>26</sup> Many cultures used wooden tablets for writing; thus, the word *book* in the Germanic languages is etymologically related to *beech* (originally a writing tablet made of beech wood).<sup>27</sup>

The use of birchbark as a writing material stretches even further in time and space. It was by no means a unique invention of the Novgorodians; we

22 Harjula (2012a; 2012b, 174, 177).

23 The birchbark is now kept in the Göttingen State and University Library. See Lorusso (2013).

24 NGB V (9), Janin (1998, 33).

25 Book XIII, Chapter XXI: “M. Varro informs us that paper owes its discovery to the victorious career of Alexander the Great, at the time when Alexandria in Egypt was founded by him; before which period paper had not been used, the leaves of the palm having been employed for writing at an early period, and after that the bark of certain trees.” (Bostock and Riley 1855, 185–186). See also Birnbaum (1977, 232).

26 De Vaan (2008, 337–338).

27 Kroonen (2013, 71).

have ancient Buddhist birchbark scrolls<sup>28</sup> and pictograms on birchbark made by the Ojibwe and other Native American peoples.<sup>29</sup> Also, birchbark writing has been practiced under various circumstances, as shown by Siberian letters on birchbark (dating from 1941 to 1956), which were written by Latvians who had been deported to prisons and concentration camps.<sup>30</sup>

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28 See, for instance, Baums (2014).

29 See, for instance, Dewdney (1975).

30 See <https://www.wdl.org/en> and search for 'birch-bark letter'.

## Dating and Periodization

Though no birchbarks contain explicit dates, most of them can be dated to relatively narrow spans of time, e.g., '1100–1120', '1240–1260' or '1380–1400'. This is far more precise than the dating for parchment texts (at least, in the absence of internal explicit dating). Russian archaeologists have been able to date the letters so precisely by using two methods: stratigraphy and dendrochronology.<sup>1</sup> Stratigraphy draws conclusions about the different layers or *strata* (*jarusy* in Russian) in which the birchbarks are found on the basis of all the archaeological objects, including building materials; dendrochronological dating relies on reading the annual growth rings on the logs used for construction in a given layer. The wood samples used for these dating methods mostly come from the logs of the corduroy roads, which had to be renewed approximately every twenty years because of the accumulation of dirt and debris. It has been calculated that the cultural layer in medieval Novgorod grew one centimeter per year. (In more recent times, the growth of the cultural layer slowed down somewhat, due to the introduction of drainage in the late eighteenth century and the replacement of log roads with more durable materials.) It is these optimal archaeological conditions that have made it possible to date birchbarks with an accuracy of ten to fifteen years. This has especially been the case at the two largest and most extensively investigated sites, the Nerev Excavation in Nerev End (1951–1962) and the Trinity Excavation in Ljudin End, which began in 1973 and is still active at the time of writing this book. These two sites, both on the Sophia Side, account for almost eighty percent of the birchbarks that have been discovered in Novgorod.

Birchbarks can be dated even more precisely if they mention names or events that are recorded in chronicles or other historical sources. For example, N963 (Section 11.7) contains the name of an archbishop known to have been in office from 1416 to 1421. Similarly, N286 (Section 11.8) refers to the renewal of a treaty between Novgorod and Sweden, which is also recorded in a chronicle entry for the year 1351; this year thus serves as the *terminus a quo* for the birchbark.

1 Major monographs and collections of articles in English on the archaeology of Novgorod are Thompson (1967; largely outdated), Brisbane and Gaimster (2001), Orton (2006), Brisbane and Hather (2007), and Brisbane et al. (2012a).

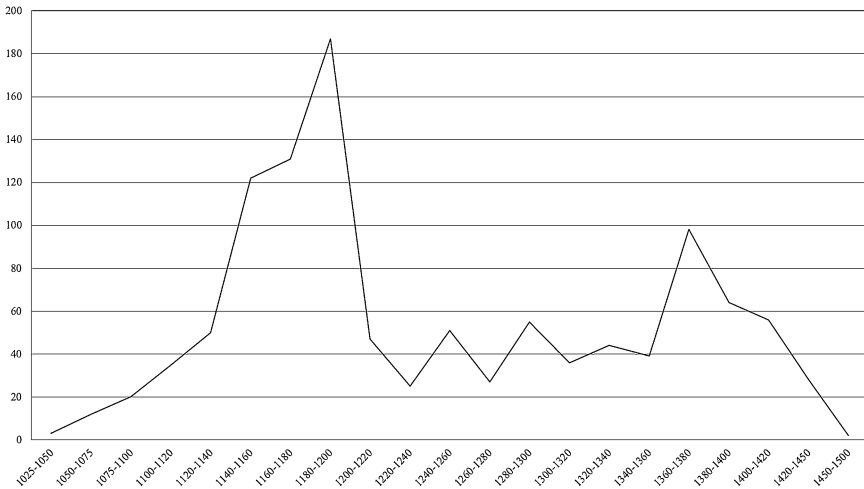


FIGURE 6 Chronological distribution of birchbark documents from Novgorod (N1–N1063) and other cities.

Note: This is an updated version of Schaeken (2012a, 25; 2012b, 216; 2017a, 124–125), based on the data provided in NGB X (146–151), XI (120–137; birchbark data from Toržok), and XII (192–193). For the chronological distribution, I follow the main principles specified in NGB X (145): for the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, regular intervals of twenty years are used. Documents from the eleventh century are categorized into three periods of twenty-five years (the earliest one being 1025–1050). In contrast to NGB X (145), the first half of the fifteenth century is divided into two intervals (1400–1420, 1420–1450), in order to have a more balanced time scale on the horizontal axis.

However, it is not always possible to date the documents so precisely. This is the case when birchbarks are found away from archaeological sites, e.g., in the course of construction work, and when they are discovered on archaeological sites at some distance from the corduroy road. In such circumstances, stratigraphy and dendrochronology are of limited use; if there is no external evidence for the date, scholars have to draw on other methods of relative dating—in particular, paleographic and/or linguistic comparisons to texts of known dates.

Figure 6 shows the distribution of birchbarks by date. From the earliest period (ca. 1025–1050) there is a gradual increase in frequency until the mid-twelfth century. In the later twelfth century there is a sharp increase in frequency; then around the year 1200, we see a surprisingly abrupt drop, almost to the level of 125 years previously. Over the next 250 years, the frequency never approaches that of ca. 1200; in fact, almost half of the birchbark corpus dates from before the thirteenth century.

Of course, we cannot be sure that the number of finds reflects the actual quantity of birchbarks that were produced at any given time. However,

even after the discovery of four hundred new birchbarks over the last twenty-five years, the cline in the distribution does not differ substantially from the one established by D.S. Worth on the basis of the first seven hundred birchbarks.<sup>2</sup> According to Worth, the ‘epistolary crisis’ of the thirteenth century may have been due to a devastating famine in the 1230s, which is mentioned in the chronicles, and the subsequent Mongol-Tatar invasion of medieval Russia. Even though Novgorod itself was not attacked, many of the other cities of medieval Russia, including Kiev and Vladimir, were ransacked and left in ruins, and vast regions suffered sudden falls in population. This crisis also had a serious impact on the economy of Novgorod, which was cut off from the trade routes to the Black Sea and Caspian Sea. The use of birchbark communication was closely linked to mobility, particularly that of merchants. Birchbark letters written prior to the crisis contain references to trade with cities elsewhere in medieval Russia and even further to the south; this is illustrated by, *inter alia*, finds like birchbark N1009, dating from the mid-twelfth century (see Section 11.2). Such references are virtually absent in birchbarks written after the Mongol-Tatar invasion; the focus of interest changes to the north, in particular to Karelia and the vast northeastern hinterlands colonized by Novgorod in the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.<sup>3</sup>

While the Mongol-Tatar devastation of medieval Russia was undoubtedly the main factor in the decline in production of birchbark texts in the thirteenth century, it should be noted that the ‘epistolary crisis’ actually began shortly after the year 1200, more than thirty years before the invasion. This may be explained by both internal and external factors. Most importantly, in 1207, as related in the chronicles, there was a violent power struggle between boyars from different boroughs of the city. As a result, the boyars of Ljudin End, who had previously played a dominant role in the politics and economic life of Novgorod, were expelled from the city; their homes were burned, and the borough itself entered a period of stagnation. It is precisely during this time that we see a sharp decline in the number of birchbarks recovered at the Trinity Excavation, which is located at the site of the residences of the boyars of Ljudin End. External events also adversely affected the city’s prosperity. The first of these was the sack of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade (1204); the new Latin overlords of the Byzantine Empire introduced harsh trade restrictions, which disrupted commerce between Novgorod and the Black Sea. Second, Novgorod’s rivals in the Baltic region—the new Order of the Brotherhood of the Sword, and the Swedes—posed constant threats to Novgorod’s

2 Worth (1986; 1990).

3 See Rybina (1993).



security on its western and northern frontiers; these threats ended only with the victories of the Novgorodian Prince Aleksandr Nevskij in 1242. Thus, there were both internal and external factors, beginning very early in the thirteenth century, that could have undermined the stability of the Novgorodian state long before the Mongol-Tatar incursions. The resulting economic and social problems would undoubtedly reduce travel and trade and, consequently, diminish the need for extensive birchbark communication.<sup>4</sup>

There is a new upswing in the production of birchbark letters in the second half of the fourteenth century. At this time, there is a marked increase in birchbarks that reflect one specific type of situation—the management of boyar estates outside the city (see Section 11.4). In the fifteenth century, the production of birchbarks went into a sharp decline; there are only a handful of texts dating from the latter part of that century (e.g., N495, Section 11.2), and none from the subsequent period. It is true that the cultural layers from the sixteenth century onwards are less favorable for the preservation of organic materials than the deeper layers. This is largely due to the municipal drainage systems introduced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and perhaps also to the digging of foundation pits for stone buildings in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, following the redesign of Novgorod's street plan under Catherine the Great (1778).<sup>5</sup> However, even regardless of the drainage or deep foundation pits, it is unlikely that there was any large-scale use of birchbark letters at all during the later period, for two reasons. First, during the fifteenth century the political and economic power of Novgorod waned, and in 1478 the Novgorodian lands were forcibly annexed by Grand Prince Ivan III of Muscovy. As a result, the city of Novgorod became a provincial backwater; many of the families that had been prominent during the period of independence—the principal users of birchbark communications—were forced to resettle in other regions. Second, in a broader perspective, the technology of writing changed. Paper, which had previously been quite expensive, became more readily available in the course of the fifteenth century; it displaced not only birchbark but, to a large extent, even parchment. Even though birchbark was a free product, it was slower and harder to scratch messages with a stylus than to write fluently with ink on paper.<sup>6</sup>

4 See Schaeken (2012b, 219–223).

5 See Janin (1995, 215–216; 1998, 14–17).

6 Later primary sources of information on the history of Novgorod and the Old Novgorod dialect date from the beginning of the seventeenth century. See in particular Tönnies Fonne's Russian-German phrasebook, Pskov, 1607 (Hendriks 2014) and the Novgorod Occupation Archives, 1611–1617 (Löfstrand and Nordquist 2005–2009).

While it is easy to grasp the reasons for the decline of birchbark writing, it is much harder to identify the factors that led to its adoption in the first place. To do this, we have to go back to data from the earliest period of literacy in the medieval East Slavic world.<sup>7</sup> The oldest known birchbark texts, which were found in Novgorod, date from the second quarter of the eleventh century—an alphabet, evidently a writing exercise, from ca. 1030 (N591, Section 11.6); a primitive two-sided imitation of icons of St. Barbara and Christ, with captions, also from ca. 1030 (N915-I, Section 11.7); and two letters (N246 and N247, Section 11.3), written between 1025 and 1050. No written texts have been discovered in earlier cultural layers, even though many other organic materials, including birchbark artifacts, have been preserved. There are only a few other objects with Cyrillic writing that can be given earlier dates with any certainty; these come from the first two decades of the eleventh century, only a few years after the official Christianization of the East Slavic world (988)—coins from the reigns of Vladimir I (died 1015), his son Svjatopolk (died 1019), and his son Jaroslav (the Wise) during his tenure as prince of Novgorod (before 1019), plus a seal of Jaroslav found in Novgorod dating from the first quarter of the eleventh century. Another striking discovery from this earliest period is three wax tablets in wooden frames, which contain excerpts from the Psalter (see Section 11.6 and Figure 38). Thus, taking all the reliably dated materials into consideration, we can only conclude that the systematic use of Cyrillic writing in the East Slavic world started shortly after Christianization.<sup>8</sup> This is not surprising, since establishing Christianity as the state religion, and ensuring its spread, required an ever-larger number of texts, as well as readers capable of using the texts and writers capable of producing them.

For Novgorod in particular, the earliest evidence of Cyrillic literacy dovetails nicely with the entry for the year 1030 in the Novgorod-Sophia group of chronicles. In that year, according to the chronicle, Grand Prince Jaroslav the Wise came to Novgorod “and gathered 300 children of clergy and nobility to teach them books.”<sup>9</sup> While the Grand Prince was clearly motivated by religious considerations, his educational program had the practical result of developing cultural elites who were able to read and write. This laid the foundation for the growth of literacy not only on parchment but also on birchbark. Parchment,

7 See Gippius (2012a, 230–237).

8 As Gippius puts it: “Not a single piece of native East Slav writing can unambiguously be dated to the time before 988, whereas for the decades immediately following this date the specimens of Cyrillic writing, though not numerous, provide undisputable evidence of its use in both confessional and administrative contexts.” (2012a, 231).

9 Quoted in Gippius (2012a, 236).

a highly expensive material, was used in the religious and public domain, for liturgical books, charters, and other texts intended to have enduring value; birchbark, costing little or nothing, was used for private purposes, for notes, memoranda, and other texts intended to be ephemeral. Thus, in the words of A.A. Gippius, writing on birchbark originated as “a spontaneous by-product of the spread of Christian education.”<sup>10</sup> As noted above, one of the oldest birchbarks, the alphabet (N591), belongs to the educational domain; another, the imitation icon (N915-I), is linked to religious devotional practices. Though the remaining two oldest birchbarks have different purposes, they nevertheless reflect the deep connection between religion and society; N246, which concerns an unpaid debt, mentions ‘the Holy Wood’; while N247, a report of a criminal investigation, refers to the bishop of Novgorod in a legal role.

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<sup>10</sup> Gippius (2012a, 237).

## Writing Technology and Practice

It takes virtually no effort to prepare a piece of birchbark for writing. When found, most birchbark letters are rolled up; their surfaces are often elastic and smooth to the touch. This suggests that they may have been soaked in hot water and then dried before being inscribed. One advantage of birchbark is that it consists of thin layers; if the surface layers are too rough, they can be peeled off to expose the smoother layers underneath. This handy property means that, once inscribed, the layers can be separated (cf. Figure 62), so that the message appears in duplicate, as in carbon copies; this may explain a number of inscribed birchbarks with missing upper layers, e.g., N344 and N736 (Section 11.2), and N955 (Section 11.5).

To scratch their message on the birchbark, writers used a stylus (*pisalo*) made of metal or bone (see Figure 7). Only four birchbarks are known to have been written in ink, and they all date from the final phase of birchbark literacy (second half of the fifteenth century).<sup>1</sup> Ordinarily, writers wrote their messages, or the first part of their messages, on the smoother inner (concave) side of the bark. However, this was not an invariable practice; some writers wrote first on the outer side, as in N907 (though here the writer seems to have hesitated; see Section 11.3). Longer birchbarks can be inscribed on both sides; for example, N724 (Section 11.8) starts on the outer side, and N354 (Section 11.4) on the inner. In other cases, multiple pieces of birchbark could be used, and there is even an example of a booklet made of several sheets, with perforations for binding with a leather thong (N419, Section 11.7).

Birchbark letters vary greatly in size. Among the smallest (not counting fragments) are N79 (see Figure 47), which is no bigger than  $6 \times 1.5$  cm, and N397, which is only  $4.6 \times 2.6$  cm (Figure 48). At the other end of the scale, the first page of Moisej's last will and testament (N519, see Section 11.3) is  $47.2 \times 16$  cm. The ratio of width to height varies from 2:1 to 15:1; there are a few exceptional cases like N358 (see Figure 51), which is 38.5 cm wide and 2.4 cm high. Birchbarks were usually trimmed after being inscribed, so that the edges are straight; however, a few were left untrimmed, for reasons that are unclear (see, for example, N421, Figure 19, and N477, Figure 22).

<sup>1</sup> N13 (NGB II, 14; now lost), N496 (DND 681–683; NGB XII, 244), N1089 (Gippius et al. 2017, 21–22), and Moscow 3 (Gippius et al. 2011).



FIGURE 7

Photograph of two styluses from Novgorod.

Note: One stylus is made of metal (left), and the other is made of bone and covered in a leather holster (right). They are now kept at the United Novgorod State Museum.

The texts that have been preserved in their entirety are generally not very long. Most are no more than twenty words; a few are more than fifty.<sup>2</sup> The

<sup>2</sup> See DND (20).

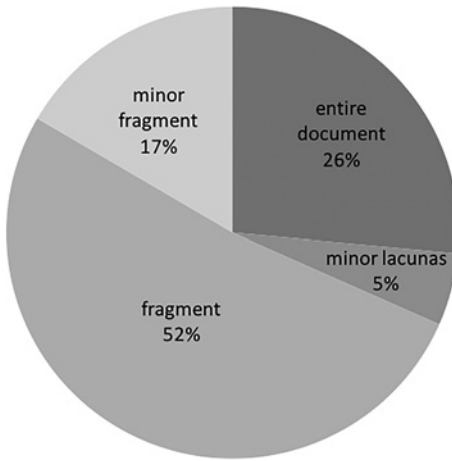


FIGURE 8

State of preservation of birchbark documents N1–N1089 from Novgorod. Note: Based on the underlying database of <http://gramoty.ru> and additional data for birchbarks that were discovered more recently (see NGB X11; Gippius et al. 2017). Note that an entire document can consist of only a few words (e.g., N79 and N397) and that a fragmentary text can still be relatively long (e.g., N930, which contains more than fifty words).

longest by far, Moscow 3, contains 52 lines and approximately 370 words,<sup>3</sup> which is about the same as a sheet of A4 or letter-size paper. The second longest text on a single piece of birchbark is a mere 166 words (N531, Section 11.5). Almost all birchbarks are written on a horizontal axis, rather than the vertical axis typical of medieval East Slavic parchment codices and paper documents (and also most modern books).<sup>4</sup>

The birchbarks selected for discussion in this book are mostly documents preserved in their entirety or with only relatively minor lacunas. However, complete texts only account for approximately a quarter of the corpus (see Figure 8). The majority of surviving birchbarks have some missing text; some of the lacunae are so minor that the text remains largely legible, while others survive only in snippets; for example, N29 (ca. 1400–1410),<sup>5</sup> shown here (Figure 9), consists of merely five letters, the last four of which may spell the dative/locative case of the pronoun ‘me’.

3 See Gippius et al. (2011). The text was written by two scribes and can be dated to the end of the fourteenth or beginning of the fifteenth century. It consists of an inventory of belongings (primarily horses) of a certain Turabej, which was apparently compiled by his housekeepers.

4 There are only a few exceptions to this rule, most notably N123 (see the drawing and comments in NGB III, 57; cf. DND 275; NGB XII, 206) and N1036 (NGB XII, 134). In contrast to Novgorod practice, writing on the vertical axis seems not to have been unusual in Moscow, as demonstrated by nos. 1, 2, and 3 (see Gippius et al. 2011, 453). Note that the last of these is written in ink and all are relatively young, belonging roughly to the fifteenth century. This shows that the scribes who wrote on birchbark in late medieval Moscow imitated writing practices on parchment and paper rather than continuing the specific nature of the tradition as we know it from Novgorod.

5 NGB II (30).



FIGURE 9

Drawing of N29 (fragment of five letters).

Some of these fragments may be the result of natural decay, but often it is clear that they were intentionally ripped or cut apart (see N752, Figure 24). Indeed, the author of N881 (see Section 11.3) explicitly orders the addressee to shred it—a command that the addressee seems to have obeyed. There are too many birchbarks in which the name of the sender, sometimes along with that of the addressee, has been removed (e.g., N155, Figure 17), for this to have been an accident; it must have been a well-established practice, probably to keep the identity of the correspondents from prying eyes.<sup>6</sup>

We do not know how long birchbark letters were kept after reading. Some were certainly thrown away immediately (like those that were shredded), but others may have been preserved for some time. This was probably the case for many of the lists of goods, expenses or debts that still had to be settled, or other kinds of writings that were intended for extended personal use, such as the miniature prayer book, N419 (see Figure 40); Moisej's 'notebook', N521 (Section 11.3); the birchbark icon, N915-I (Figure 39); and the icon-like drawing that accompanies the marriage document in N955 (Figure 27).

To date, no systematic caches or archives have been found, and it seems unlikely that any will be in the future. By its very nature, writing on birchbark is generally what has been called 'throw-away literacy'.<sup>7</sup> Most letters were probably discarded as soon as the business was completed, or the personal message conveyed. The legal documents on birchbark were apparently drafts for fair copies to be written on parchment. This practice is explicitly mentioned in N831 (ca. 1140–1160),<sup>8</sup> a letter for the purpose of mediating a serious legal dispute; here the author ends with the instruction: 'And you, Stepan, having copied (this) onto parchment, send (it) away' (cf. also N519/520, Section 11.3).<sup>9</sup> As S. Franklin notes, "Scribes of parchment manuscripts kept half an eye on

6 Cf. NGB V (9), Bulanin (1997, 153–154).

7 See Franklin (1985, 19–20; 2002, 183–184).

8 NGB XI (48–52), DND (302–305). See also Franklin (2002, 183–184), Gippius (2004a, 188, 224–226), Mendoza (2016, 125, 127), Dekker (2018, 12).

9 Note that Stepan is not the addressee of the rest of the letter, which is from 'Kuz'ma and from his children to the "elder" Raguil.' Other birchbarks in which parchment (*xartija/xarot'ja*, from Byzantine Greek *xartion* 'sheet of paper') is mentioned are N90 and N992 (see NGB XII, 93, 205).

eternity; senders of birch-bark letters would hardly have counted on the prying persistence of future archaeologists.”<sup>10</sup> To draw a parallel with present-day practices, we would also be surprised, and probably not best pleased, to discover that our endless stream of e-mails, text messages, tweets and whatsapps was being read and extensively commented on by historians and linguists in future centuries.

Among the many interesting questions posed by birchbark letters was how they were conveyed from sender to recipient. There is no evidence that there was a regular, institutionalized postal service. However, a number of letters explicitly mention their messengers, sometimes by name (see Section 11.3 on the role of the messenger). It appears that the messengers were often drawn from the senders’ personal circle—servants, family members, or other associates. In other cases, they must simply have been people who were travelling to the appropriate destination. This must sometimes have raised concerns about confidentiality. Thus, N590 (see Section 11.8), from the last third of the eleventh century, is evidently an intelligence report, consisting only of the words ‘The Lithuanians have attacked the Karelians’; neither the addressee nor the sender is named, although the complicated symbol drawn on the left side of the letter may be some form of encrypted identification. The information about the sender and recipient is likewise omitted in a later intelligence report, N636 (Section 11.8). N24 (ca. 1400–1410),<sup>11</sup> of which only the last sentence has survived, explicitly mentions the need for confidentiality: ‘(...) send a letter in secret.’ Obviously, to maintain secrecy, the author would have chosen someone he trusted as a messenger; in sending his ‘secret’ letter, the addressee would have done likewise.

Among the most recent birchbark finds, we have the first example of what seems to be an address, in the sense that the names of sender and addressee are mentioned not only at the beginning of the message itself but also separately on the piece of birchbark. The letter in question is N1026 (ca. 1160–1180),<sup>12</sup> which is about the purchase of a slave girl: ‘(...) And I took your slave-girl. If the slave-girl is cripple, bring her to my [...].’ The opening formula of the letter, viz. ‘From Nežila to Semka’, is repeated on the back of the birchbark and was obviously meant for the messenger as a convenient aide-mémoire. N1055, which was already treated above (Section 1.2), also seems to include an address, but now the location of the addressee (‘Rozvad’s Street’) is mentioned.

10 Franklin (2002, 40).

11 NGB II (26), DND (646).

12 NGB XII (125–126).



## Users and Literacy

Figure 10 presents a general picture of the contents of the birchbark corpus. Most of it consists of private letters. The wide range of topics of these letters will be demonstrated in Part II. The remainder of the texts are various kinds of notes, records, and documentation rather than direct and explicit communication between one or more senders and one or more addressees. An important group comprises business records concerning various financial, commercial and household affairs. Many of these birchbarks consist of simple lists of goods or names combined with units of currency that should be collected or paid.<sup>1</sup> The category ‘others’ shown in Figure 10 includes several genres that each make up less than five percent of the corpus: ecclesiastical texts;<sup>2</sup> official or semi-official documents, including judicial reports and drafts of wills and contracts;<sup>3</sup> labels (ownership tags and labels accompanying goods);<sup>4</sup> writing exercises;<sup>5</sup> literary and folklore items;<sup>6</sup> and birchbarks with random words, letters, and numbers.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the group called ‘fragments’ consists of parts of texts that cannot be classified at all because they lack specific information.

Who were the people who communicated by means of birchbark texts? Were the authors or senders also the writers, and were the addressees or recipients also the readers? In the euphoria of the earliest discoveries, many scholars concluded from the mundane content of the letters and the non-clerical names of their authors that literacy was widespread or even near-universal in

1 For instance, N495, N722, and N926.

2 See esp. Section II.7.

3 For instance, N154, N519/520, and N692.

4 For instance, N957, N1056, and other types of ownership tags treated in the same section (III.3). On an alternative interpretation of birchbarks that seem at first sight to be labels, see N79, N397, and N443.

5 Most notably Onfim's efforts, see Section II.6.

6 For instance, the riddle N10, the lyrical text N521, the fragmentary legend N930, and the spells N715, N734, and N1022.

7 Some of these cases are clearly a pen test (*probatio pennae*); see N702 (ca. 1360–1380; NGB IX, 91–92), which consists of the single word *pokušti*. Its meaning became clear only after the discovery of N1085 (mid-fourteenth century), in which we find the word *pokušaju* ‘I am trying out, testing’ (Gippius et al. 2017, 18). Thus, N702 can now be reconstructed as the infinitive *pokuš(a)ti* ‘to try out, test’. N1089 (second half of the fourteenth century) resembles the writing exercises of Onfim (e.g., N202) and may also be a ‘complex pen test’, as the editors put it (Gippius et al. 2017, 21–22).

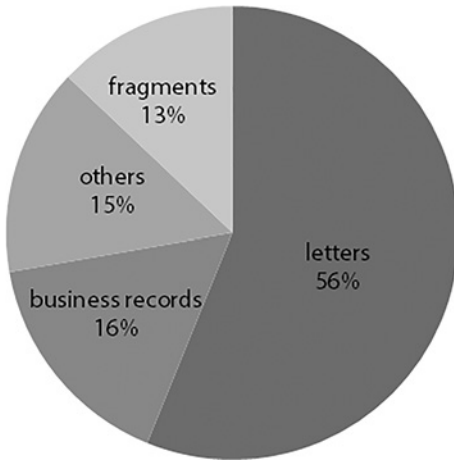


FIGURE 10 General content of birchbark documents N1–N1089 from Novgorod.

Note: Based on the underlying database of <http://gramoty.ru> and additional data for birchbarks that were discovered more recently (NGB XII; Gippius et al. 2017; see also DND 20; Gippius 2012a, 226, fn. 3). Note that the percentages are merely a rough indication of the sizes of the various categories. For instance, a fragmentary text that mentions some sort of commercial activity but lacks an opening formula of the type 'From X to Y' or a verb in the second person (pointing to an addressee) can only be tentatively classified as a business record, although it may have been an incomplete letter. Also, a single text may consist of multiple categories, like N521, which contains two business notes, a lyrical spell, and a draft of an official document.

medieval Novgorod.<sup>8</sup> However, the issue has proven to be more complicated. Now that we have more than 1200 birchbark letters, we can establish a more accurate profile of the 'average' birchbark user. In many cases, we can even place authors, addressees, and other people named in the letters in elaborate social networks (see Section III.5). Many of these names also appear in chronicles, treaties, and legal documents on parchment, so it is clear that they were members of the social elite—boyars and prominent merchants, people with money and power, as well as those who had to conduct business with them or for them. If the letters mention money, it is usually a large amount; if they mention social conflicts, there is usually a great deal at stake.<sup>9</sup>

8 See Picchio (1979–1980, 651–652), Levin (1989a, 127–128), Xoroškevič (2003, 34–38), Bjørnflaten (2006, 114).

9 On the broader cultural-historical and philological context of the writing tradition on birchbark, see in particular Franklin (2002; review Gippius 2004c) and also Medynceva (2000), who discusses literacy in medieval Russia on the basis of epigraphic evidence.

This is only the general picture; the birchbark letters provide such rich data on social life that we can give a much more nuanced account of the users. Many were indeed wealthy and powerful men who were prominent in the secular life of the city, but this was certainly not always the case. Some birchbarks were written by members of the clergy, the class that comprised the main users of parchment literacy; for example, in N605 (Section 11.7) one monk, Efrem, writes to appease another, Isuxija, who is angry because Efrem failed to show up for an appointment. Other birchbarks were sent by villagers to gain the attention of their absent landlords; thus, in N361 (Section 11.4) starving peasants tell their master that they have no seeds to plant and nothing to eat. Dozens of birchbarks have women as their authors or their addressees; more than twenty of these are discussed in this book, especially in Section 11.5. For instance, in N752, the oldest known text by a Slavic woman, the author scolds her lover for neglecting her and threatens him with hell if he is toying with her affections; in N644 Nežka berates her brother at considerable length for reneging on a promise; in N531 Anna pleads with her brother to help her in a legal wrangle because her opponent has accused her of fraud and slandered her honor; in the poignant N49 Nastas'ja writes in grief to tell her brothers that her husband has died and wonders how she and her children will get by in the future; in a much more joyful letter, N955, a matchmaker writes to negotiate with the mother of a prospective bride; and in N9, one of the most famous birchbarks, Gostjata begs for help because her husband has thrown her out of the house, married another woman, and kept her dowry for himself.<sup>10</sup>

These are only a few of the examples where the user's profile differs from the average; they illustrate how deeply writing on birchbark was integrated into a wide range of activities in medieval Novgorodian society. Birchbark letters were not the exclusive domain of the social elite. In principle, anyone who was aware of the use of writing and had something important to convey could send one.

It is important to keep in mind that the users of birchbarks did not always have to read or write the letters themselves. It is generally difficult to establish whether the authors of the letters were the actual writers or whether the addressees were the actual readers. Even when several birchbarks from the same

10 On the role of women in birchbark documents, see Medynceva (1985, 235–237), Zaliznjak (1992), Čajkina (2006), Levin (1983; 2015). As Levin (1983, 158) noted: “As only a handful of documents were written by women, they would seem to be under-represented as authors. The location of the excavations which unearthed the birchbark documents—within the city of Novgorod—provides an explanation for this deficiency. Women tended to stay home while their husbands handled business outside the city. For that reason, the notes women sent have not been unearthed, while those they received have been discovered.”

author are written in different handwritings, we cannot conclude that the author was unable to read and write himself. The tribute collector Grigorij (see Section III.5.6) is the author of ten surviving memoranda and letters, which span thirty years and were written in various places; they are all in the same handwriting, so there is every reason to believe that Grigorij wrote them himself. By contrast, the prominent boyar Petrok Mixalkovič (see Section III.5.3) is the author of five surviving letters, all of which are in different handwritings. However, in view of his high social rank, it is likely that Petrok was also able to read and write but, like many a busy modern official, made use of secretaries.<sup>11</sup> In the case of the extensive network of the business associates Luka and Ivan (Section III.5.5), paleographic evidence allows us to conclude that N997 (see Section III.3), which is a letter '[From] Negožir to Tešen', was written by Luka, whereas one of Luka's own letters to his father, N999 (Section III.5.3), must have been written by someone else on behalf of Luka.

In a number of cases, it was evidently the messengers who wrote the letters for the authors, and they were sometimes also deputed to read the messages aloud to the addressees. For example, in N497 (Section III.3) Gavrila writes to invite his sister and brother-in-law for a visit; their reply is written on the same piece of birchbark in the same handwriting, so undoubtedly the messenger was the actual writer of both messages. In N422 (Section III.2) Mestjata writes to ask a favor from two business associates; he includes instructions about bowing to the addressees—an action that could only be performed by the messenger as he read the letter aloud. However, the fact that the messengers in these two cases were also the writers and/or the readers does not mean that the authors and the recipients were themselves illiterate. Birchbarks N519/520 and N521 (Section II.3) were found rolled up into a single packet, so they are thought to belong to a single author, Moisej, even though they are in different hands. As N519/520 is a testament, it was probably written by Moisej's priest. By contrast, N521, which has been dubbed 'Moisej's notebook', contains four distinct texts; one of them seems to be a rather steamy lyrical spell, which is so private that it must have been written by Moisej himself. Thus, we can conclude that Moisej was able to write himself (N521) but, in some circumstances, allowed others to do the writing for him (N519/520).

Furthermore, there is no evidence that professional scribes were employed on a large scale or, more generally, that the production of birchbarks was ever a professionalized domain (as book production was). Thus, the occasional use of scribes and dictation does not imply that literacy was a socially restricted

11 See DND (313).

phenomenon. N1000 (Section 11.2) was sent to Novgorod from the road and says nothing except that the authors are well; it seems improbable here that the senders would have bothered to hire a professional scribe. It is even more unlikely that authors would entrust highly personal or confidential letters to outside parties. The furious author of N752 (Section 11.5) writes to her lover that, if he loved her, he would tear himself away 'from the eyes of others', which means that she wants to keep their relations private. The writer of N566 ('Come to the rye-field on Saturday, or send word'; Section 11.5) obviously wants to conceal his/her own name and the name of the addressee; therefore, it would be very strange if s/he were to entrust this message to an outsider.

Undoubtedly, not all the authors of birchbarks were (fully) literate; this was almost certainly the case with the petitions to landlords that are written in the name of entire villages. Indeed, N307 (Section 11.4) contains so many mistakes and is written in such a clumsy hand that we can only conclude that the peasants had no choice but to settle for a semi-literate writer. An exceptional case of 'bad Novgorodian', even worse than N307, is N1088 (roughly dating from the second half of the thirteenth century). The writer of the text, which mainly consists of a list of names, must have suffered from some sort of 'dysgraphia', as the editors put it.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, N9 (Section 11.5), Gostjata's letter about her cruel treatment by her husband, is written in such an even, calligraphic hand and with such bookish spelling that we may assume that it was the work of a trained manuscript scribe. N955 (Section 11.5), a matchmaking letter, has illuminated initial letters that were certainly produced by someone familiar with book decorations. Two of the earliest letters, N912 and N913 (ca. 1050–1075), provide strong evidence for this point.<sup>13</sup> N912 reads:

A letter from Ljud'slav to Xoten. Send me the money. Even if (it is) without letting Sven' go, send (it).

(N912, ca. 1050–1075)

Surprisingly, this mundane dunning letter is written in a calligraphic hand, like a church book; this raises doubts that Ljud'slav could have been the writer, since his name is emphatically secular rather than ecclesiastical. (The same is true of the name of the addressee, Xoten, which will come up again in the

<sup>12</sup> See Gippius et al. (2017, 20–21).

<sup>13</sup> NGB XI (103–105), DND (246–247 on N912; 281–282 on N913). See also Sitzmann (2007, 29 on the Scandinavian provenance of the name Sven' in N912), T.V. Roždestvenskaja (2008a, 92), Gippius (2012a, 240–242).

discussion of N902; see Section 11.3) These doubts are reinforced by N913, a list of church feasts from September to January, which is written in the very same calligraphic hand. It is highly improbable that the businessman Ljud'slav was simultaneously a trained church scribe who would be concerned about the sequence of holy days; it is much more likely that he asked a clergyman to write his letter to Xoten. There is no reason to think that this was an exceptional request, especially in the oldest period, when writing was a relatively new phenomenon.

Nevertheless, we do not need to be skeptical about the statement that there were many literates in medieval Novgorod and that they came from diverse social backgrounds. This is also supported by the discovery of hundreds of styluses in Novgorod<sup>14</sup> and the evidence we have for literacy training from the earliest period onwards, such as wax tablets used for writing. Birchbark letter N687 (Section 11.6) treats the schooling of children as an entirely routine matter, side by side with everyday household business.

We can conclude that communication by means of birchbark letters was, in principle, open to everyone in medieval Novgorodian society. However, in practice it was mainly used by the higher social strata, for the simple reason that this was the group that needed to communicate over long distances and to coordinate large-scale activities like government administration, tax collecting, commerce, and legal investigations. Urban artisans and peasants in the villages moved in relatively narrow circles and thus had less reason to communicate in writing.

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14 See Ovčinnikova (2000); also Levin (1989a, 133), Janin (1995, 225; 1998, 37, 184, 419–420), Franklin (2002, 37, fn. 87), Rybina and Janin (2009, 93).

## Intersections between Birchbark Writing and Graffiti

On several occasions, the analysis of birchbark letters has benefited from research that is concerned with another witness of lay literacy in the medieval Slavic world, namely graffiti on church walls.<sup>1</sup> Specialists have been continuing earlier epigraphic investigations in the churches of Novgorod (primarily St. Sophia) and have explored other locations as well, including places far away, like Istanbul, Bethlehem, and even in France.<sup>2</sup> New insights gained from evidence on birchbark and church walls have been correlated in a more systematic way. This interdisciplinary approach has enhanced both areas of study, also with regard to dating graffiti more accurately on the basis of detailed paleographic patterns established for birchbark documents.<sup>3</sup>

A telling example of the fruitful interaction between research on birchbark documents and epigraphy is N1000 (see Section 11.2). The name of one of the letter's senders, Kyas, appears to be of Turkic rather than Slavic origin.<sup>4</sup> The same name, in the form of the patronymic Kijasovič, was identified on a

- 1 This section is a revised version of Schaeken (2017a, 132–134). For general publications on epigraphic evidence from Novgorod, see Medynceva (1978; 2000), Franklin (2002, 16–82), and T.V. Roždestvenskaja (1992, 48–115; 2008a, 20–90; 2012). Apart from stone church walls, there are other writing surfaces on which we mostly find single words or short texts: (precious) metal (coins, ingots, 'snake amulets', liturgical objects, etc.); lead (seals, but also the two lead plates 'Svinc. 1' and 'Svinc. 2'; see Preface, fn. 2); slate (spindle whorls); wax (coated on wooden tablets; see the Novgorod Psalter, Figure 38); and, most notably, wood. Wooden objects with writing on them include cylinder seals (see N902, Section 11.3), tally sticks, panel icons, even bowls and spoons, as in the case of the wooden bowl that may have belonged to Jakun (Jakša) Mirosłavič (see Section 111.5.3) or the wooden spoon of Ivan Varfolomeevič (Section 111.5.7 and Figure 60).
- 2 Recent publications on the Cyrillic inscriptions in Hagia Sophia in Istanbul are Artamonov et al. (2009; 2010; 2012) and Artamonov and Gippius (2012). East Slavic graffiti found in the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem are treated in Artamonov et al. (2013; 2016). For two recent discoveries of medieval Russian inscriptions from the twelfth or early thirteenth century in France (in churches located on the southern- and westernmost pilgrimage roads to Santiago de Compostela), see Brun et al. (2014) and Gordin and T.V. Roždestvenskaja (2016).
- 3 In this respect, S.M. Mixeev (2010, 92) rightfully observes that many authors of Novgorodian graffiti must also have written on birchbark; therefore, the parameters of extrastratigraphical dating are in principle the same for birchbark documents and graffiti.
- 4 NGB XII (100).

fragment of a plaster wall from the Cathedral on the Protoka in Smolensk.<sup>5</sup> An autograph on a church wall of St. Sophia in Novgorod also turned out to be of Turkic provenance: Sandus.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, N926 (see Section 11.2) reveals the Turkic patronymic Gjulopinič,<sup>7</sup> i.e., son of Gjulopa, a name that is attested in a fragmentary list of names on birchbark, N729 (ca. 1160–1180).<sup>8</sup> Finally, a reanalysis of N71 offers the new reading (in normalized spelling) *Ilʹdatino selišče*, i.e., the village of a person with the Slavicized Turkic name Il'djata.<sup>9</sup> All this new onomastic evidence from the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, on birchbark and church walls, shows that the presence in the Novgorodian lands of individuals with Turkic roots was not unusual in pre-Mongolian times.<sup>10</sup>

There is more onomastic data on birchbark that can be corroborated by the results of recent epigraphic research. For instance, the first element of the name Goimer (*Goi-*) in N1004 (see Section 11.3) now finds a parallel in an early Glagolitic inscription in Novgorod's St. Sophia.<sup>11</sup> In the same cathedral, a second attestation of the name Naško was discovered; the first one appeared in the fragmentary list of names and sums of money, N966 (ca. 1240–1260).<sup>12</sup> The reconstruction of the name Kulotka in the fragment Staraja Russa 45 (ca. 1180–1200) is once again confirmed by a reanalysis of an autograph in St. Sophia.<sup>13</sup> A final example is the tiny fragment N321 (ca. 1340–1360), which includes the word *Lbiske*; its tentative interpretation as a personal name can now be corroborated by an inscription in the same cathedral.<sup>14</sup>

Recent epigraphic research has also drawn attention to some cases in which the names of people who appear on birchbark might be identified as being the same individuals who left their marks on the walls of a house of God. In the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul there are two inscriptions that include the names Grečin ('Holy Sophia! Grečin wrote (this)') and Olisej ('Lord, help Your servants ... Olisej ...'). We only know of one person with the same name who was alive during the period to which the inscriptions are attributed (second half of the twelfth to early thirteenth century): the famous Novgorodian priest and

5 Gippius and Mixeev (2013a, 180–183).

6 Gippius and Mixeev (2011, 44–46).

7 Gippius and Mixeev (2011, 46, fn. 30).

8 DND (455).

9 Gippius (2012b), NGB XII (200–201).

10 NGB XII (201).

11 The inscription reads *Naš[ʹgo]i*. See Mixeev (2012, 78).

12 NGB XII (77–78), Gippius and Mixeev (2013b, 158–159).

13 The autograph reads *Kulotʹka*. See NGB XII (176), Gippius and Mixeev (2011, 46).

14 The inscription reads the name *Lʹbistʹko*. See DND (566), NGB XII (223), Gippius and Mixeev (2013b, 163–164).



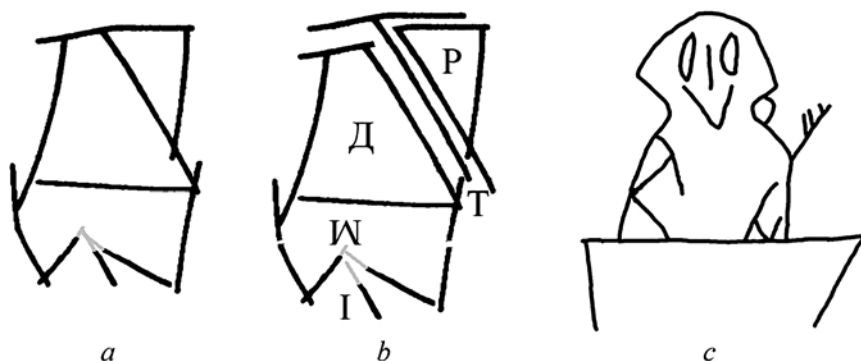


FIGURE 11 Monogram in N797 and the anthropomorphic monogram of deacon Dušen'.

icon painter Olisej Petrovič Grečin, who figures in the chronicles and on birchbark (see Section 111.5.4). It is quite possible that this Olisej Grečin was the author of the graffiti in the Hagia Sophia.<sup>15</sup> Another, though rather speculative case is the eleventh-century autograph 'Efrem the Syrian' carved on the walls of Novgorod's St. Sophia. This Efrem, who was perhaps also responsible for inscribing the words *parex̄ mari* (a Slavic adaptation of the Classical Syriac formula 'Bless, O Lord') in St. Sophia, might be identified as the monk Efrem who wrote birchbark letter N605 (see Section 11.7).<sup>16</sup>

A final example of the productive collaboration between researchers in the field of graffiti and birchbark writing (often experts in both disciplines at the same time) concerns the interesting occurrence of more than a dozen monograms in St. Sophia, not counting the usual ones bearing the name Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup> The monograms apparently have a Byzantine origin; they consist of personal names (Lazor', Stefan, Luka, Putka, etc.), of which all the letters or some of them (consonants only, as in the case of a certain Mečislav) are organically combined in the form of a figure. In one particular case the monogram even has an anthropomorphic appearance; see Figure 11 (c), which represents the name Dušen' and his profession, viz. deacon.<sup>18</sup> Birchbark document N797 (ca. 1180–1200)<sup>19</sup> probably also contains an example that belongs to this playful category of monogram drawings.

15 Artamonov and Gippius (2012, 44); see also Artamonov et al. (2012, 285).

16 See Gippius et al. (2012, 281, fn. 25), and also Temčín (2015). On another eleventh-century Semitic inscription in St. Sophia, viz. *kun̄i roni*, see the remarks on N590, Section 11.8, fn. 9.

17 Gippius and Mixeev (2013b, 154–156).

18 The anthropomorphic monogram reads *duak[ъ] Dušen[ъ]*; see Gippius and Mixeev (2013b, 156).

19 NGB XI (26), DND (455).

The monogram is depicted in Figure 11 (a), and it is also shown in a decomposed form (b). The base is clearly the letter *D*, like in the case of deacon Dušen's ingenious signature. The letters *R* (at the far right) and *M* (below and upside down) are quite straightforward. The ligature of *D* plus *R* might also include the letter *T*, and *M* below seems to incorporate an additional letter, most likely *I*. The combination *D*, *R*, *M*, and probably also *T* and *I*, perfectly fits in with the interpretation of the rest of the very fragmented text, in which the name of the author is reconstructed as *Dšmitrš*. The monogram's letters support this conjecture: *D*, *M*, *I*, *T*, *R* composed in counterclockwise order yield *D[š]mitr[š]*.

## Language and Communication

The second line of one of the oldest surviving birchbark letters, N247 (ca. 1025–1050; see Section 11.3), which was found in 1956, reads in transliteration as follows:

*azamъkekěleadъrikělēagospodarъvъnetjažěneděe*

This sequence of letters caused considerable headaches for the authors of the fifth volume of the diplomatic edition of the birchbark finds (1963).<sup>1</sup> Of course, it does not help that there are no word divisions, which is usual in medieval texts. However, it becomes really problematic when we do not know the meaning of words or when case endings are unclear. Grappling with these dilemmas, the authors proposed the following reading:

*A zamъke kělea, dvъri kělēa. A gospodarъ vъ netjažě, neděe.*

Unfortunately, this reading could not be understood in any coherent way; it assumed grammatical incongruities and the interpretation as a whole made little or no sense: ‘the lock of the (monastery) cell, the doors of the cell. And the owner is lazy, does nothing.’ It was only in the 1980s that linguistic knowledge of Old Novgorodian reached a point where the given passage, as well as many others in the corpus, could be properly understood. In the corrected readings from 1986 and 1993, the second line of N247 is read as follows:<sup>2</sup>

*A zamъke kěle a dvъri kělē. A gospodarъ vъ ne tjažě ne děe.*

This reading is easy to understand: ‘But the lock is intact, the door is intact, and the master for that reason is not pursuing damages.’ This fits in perfectly with the content of the rest of the text, and N247 thus turned out to be a coherent report of a judicial investigation. The key to the new interpretation was the realization that the word *kěl-* was not a mistake for *kelija* ‘monastic cell’, but rather the normal Old Novgorod dialectal reflex of the Common Slavic

<sup>1</sup> NGB V (69–71).

<sup>2</sup> See NGB VIII (111–112, 240), IX (149).

root for 'whole', which in other dialects of Old East Slavic (and, in fact, in any other Slavic language) would have been *cěl*-.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the case endings in *kěle*, *zamъke* and *kělě*, which had been misunderstood in 1963, proved to be the expected Old Novgorod forms.<sup>4</sup> The reanalysis of the rest of the line showed that the correct word division was different from the initial reading; there simply was no 'lazy owner' in the picture.

The Old Novgorod dialect reflected in birchbark letters often differs strikingly from the language of Old East Slavic parchment texts. The latter were mainly written in an East Slavic variant of Church Slavonic, with many features stemming from the South Slavic dialects of the Balkans. Generally speaking, medieval Church Slavonic texts, which had restricted functions, provide little information about the actual variation and usage of East Slavic dialects of the time. Moreover, Old Novgorodian is markedly different from the dialects of other regions. Located on the northern periphery of the Slavic linguistic zone, and influenced by non-Slavic languages (Baltic and, most importantly, Baltic Finnic), Old Novgorodian developed in a way that distinguished it from all the other Slavic dialects.

By now, the grammar of Old Novgorodian has been largely mapped out, and its unique features are generally well understood.<sup>5</sup> The peculiar orthography of most birchbark letters, with its frequent interchange of certain sets of vowel

3 In historical phonological terms, this Old Novgorod phenomenon is called the absence of the effects of the second (regressive) palatalization of velars. See Nesset (2015, 293–295) for a basic explanation (with reference to N247) and a brief discussion of different explanatory scenarios that have been proposed (in particular Bjørnflaten 1990, 324–329; 1995, 45–48; Vermeer 2000, 17–22).

4 Nominative singular masculine forms of the so-called *o*-stem, ending in *-e* in the case of *kěle* and *zamъke* (instead of *-ъ* everywhere else in Slavic), and the nominative plural feminine form of the so-called *ā*-stem, ending in *-ě* in the case of *kělě* (instead of *-y* elsewhere). See Nesset (2015, 296–299) for basic comments on these two morphological phenomena (with reference to N247).

5 See DND (11–226) for Zaliznjak's comprehensive grammatical sketch of the Old Novgorod dialect, which covers (historical) phonology (and underlying orthographic conventions), morphology, and the main syntactic and lexical peculiarities. For the paleographic aspects of the birchbark corpus, see Zaliznjak's detailed description in NGB X (133–429). Additionally, articles in English and other Western European languages on the Old Novgorod dialect (mainly concerning historical phonology and morphology, but also the verbal system and occasionally syntax and orthography) include a series of articles by Vermeer (1986; 1991a; 1991b; 1992; 1994; 1995; 1996; 1997a; 1997b; 1999; 2000; 2003) as well as Worth (1982; 1984b; 1996), Klenin (1989), Sjöberg (1990), Bjørnflaten (1990; 1995; 2000; 2006), Birnbaum (1991; 1996b), Le Feuvre (1993; 1998; 1999), Nørgård-Sørensen (1997a; 1997b; 2015), Mendoza (2002), Andersen (2006), Nuorluoto (2007), Kwon (2009; 2016), Majer (2014). Also, see the bibliography in DND (847–861) for some older or more general articles pertaining to the Old Novgorod dialect.

letters, has also become a familiar phenomenon, called ‘everyday’ (*bytovoj*) spelling. While the earliest scholarship mainly saw chaos in this spelling and blamed it on the writers’ lack of education, we now know that the orthography was a regular alternative to the patterns typical in parchment texts and that it must have been taught in literacy training.<sup>6</sup> For instance, when the author of N439 (Section II.2), the merchant Moisej, wrote *voxoxo* for what would be *vъse* ‘all’ (‘... and *all* the wrought wares ...’) in other Slavic texts of the same period, it was not because he was an incompetent speller, but rather because he was a Novgorodian and used the alternative Old Novgorod variant.<sup>7</sup>

Even though we now know a great deal about the phonology and morphology of the Old Novgorod dialect, it can often be difficult to understand the texts themselves. In the first place, they can contain words or specific meanings that are unattested elsewhere, e.g., *znatъba* in N705, *privitka* in N717, *polubuvъyi* in N735, *pošibati* in N954, or *prisunuti* in N1045. Second, they can include previously unknown or unrecognized syntactic patterns. Finally, the texts are characteristically brief, even laconic, and, much like a present-day text message, they assume cultural and contextual knowledge that outsiders, such as modern readers, may not share.

In more recent times, the linguistic study of birchbark letters has increasingly focused on historical pragmatics and sociolinguistics. In the field of pragmatics, much progress has been made in the study of the communicative strategies chosen by the letter writers. Their orientation point in time and space plays an important role here. This is illustrated by N879 (Section III.3), in which the author Žirjata steps out of his own spatial and temporal orientation and adopts the perspective of the intended reader, Radjata, at the imagined moment of reading: ‘Give this (man) what he has said’—that is, ‘the man who is standing in front of you now, who has just given you verbal instructions.’ If Žirjata had kept his own perspective, the referential elements would be quite different: \*‘Give that (man, the one I am about to send to you) what he is about to ask you.’ Another case of unexpectedly shifted reference points appears in Staraja Russa 15, in which the author Petr composes his letter as if he were giving instructions on the spot to the addressee Vasil’ and to Vyšata, addressing them consecutively (see Section III.4).

6 See Nessel (2015, 291–293) for a basic introduction to the unexpected spelling systems used on birchbark. See further Zaliznjak (1986, 93–96, 100–109, 217; 2002a) and DND (21–28).

7 In *voxoxo* we see the regular Old Novgorod spelling, according to which the vowel letters *o* and *ъ* are interchangeable (thus, *voxoxo* can also be read as *vъxъъ*). We also see that the consonant *x* reflects the situation before what is known as the Common Slavic second (progressive) palatalization (also called third palatalization) of velars, which eventually yielded *s* elsewhere in East Slavic. Again, see Nessel (2015, 294–295) for a basic explanation of the linguistic discussion.

The pragmatics of communication on birchbark will be the focus of Part III, but texts that are pragmatically interesting and unexpected can be found throughout this book. They include texts with formulas like 'I have sent X to you with Y', with the perfect (past) tense. For example, in *Staraja Russa* 39 (see Section 11.2), Grigorij writes, 'I have sent to you six barrels of wine.' Seeing the perfect tense of the translation, the modern reader expects that it reflects the referential perspective of the author—that is, that Grigorij has sent the wine prior to the moment of writing. However, the birchbark includes the instructions on what to do with the wine, including checking its level to make sure that none has been stolen or spilled. This presupposes that the wine will not arrive before the birchbark, otherwise the instructions would come too late to be of use. Thus, the only logical reading is that the birchbark and the wine were sent off together; the perfect tense can then be explained with reference to the perspective of the recipients. Comparable constructions can be found in other premodern writing cultures, for instance, ancient Greek, Latin, and various ancient Semitic languages; it is generally known as the 'epistolary past tense'.<sup>8</sup>

The sociolinguistics of birchbark letters is also of great interest. In the corpus, we can see a full range of register differences, from 'authentic' Old Novgorodian to strict Church Slavonic. At the upper (Church Slavonic) end of the spectrum, the corpus comprises texts that aspired to follow the norms of translated liturgical and biblical books used in services, although there was no standardization in a modern sense, and some variation can be seen in the usage of individual writers and copyists. There are relatively few birchbarks (approximately fifty, which is less than five percent of the total corpus)<sup>9</sup> written in the Church Slavonic register; their content is connected with religious activities; cf., e.g., N419 (Section 11.7), a booklet containing two prayers, and also several

8 However, there are linguistic reasons to assume that in the case of examples on birchbark like *Staraja Russa* 39, the matter is more complicated. It seems that the author retains his own perspective, looking back on (a) his decision to send the goods away; (b) the preparations that have been made; and (c) the writing of the letter, by which the sending process is ratified and therefore regarded as completed. See Schaeken et al. (2014) and Dekker (2018, 115–136) for an exposition of this view.

9 Birchbark texts of an ecclesiastical character, written primarily in Church Slavonic, are grouped together per period in DND (see 281–283, 347–349, 462–467, 522–524, 641–642, 694; see also 823–829, which contains a special Church Slavonic glossary, including a list of birchbark texts that belong to this category). NGB XII also includes some Church Slavonic birchbark texts: N916 and N930, which were already incorporated in DND, and additionally N970, N977, and N1022 (for the Church Slavonic glossary, see NGB XII, 190–191). Finally, some recent reanalyses in NGB XII add to the number of texts that fall into the same 'ecclesiastical' category; see, for instance, N206, and also N450 (ca. 1180–1200), which appears to be the beginning of Hebr. 2:13: 'Behold I and the [children] (which God hath given me).' Historical evidence shows that N450 may be connected to prayers for the Absolution of the dead (see NGB XII, 241–243; Schaeken 2017a, 130).

incantations that invoke angels, ultimately from Christian apocrypha (N715 and similar texts treated in Section 11.7). There are also texts with a mixture of Church Slavonic and Old Novgorod dialect forms. For example, in N605, the monk Efrem mostly writes in Old Novgorodian; however, he also includes non-formulaic (original) elements in Church Slavonic, a language he would have known from church practice.

Apart from Church Slavonic, the language seen in birchbarks allowed for a fair amount of variation, therefore we do not see the standardized consistency of spelling and usage that is so characteristic of modern literary languages. However, there can be no doubt that some writers were sensitive to the nuances of linguistic register. That sensitivity was not limited to the dichotomy between ‘authentic’ Old Novgorodian and ‘pure’ Church Slavonic; rather, it could involve a subtler choice of elements from the middle part of the sociolinguistic spectrum. Thus, some writers use a subtle, context-sensitive mix of Novgorodian elements and elements taken from the supra-regional variant of Old East Slavic; they obviously regarded the latter as a prestige variant and could draw from it freely to give their locutions an important (e.g., deferential or official) tone.

For example, in N724 (Section 11.8), the author Sava does not use specifically Old Novgorod elements in his main message on the outer side of the birchbark. Thus, he consistently chooses the nominative singular masculine ending *-ъ*, characteristic of the supra-regional variant, instead of Old Novgorodian *-e* (see above). However, in the postscript on the inner side, he freely uses *-e* and other characteristically local features.

In N907 (Section 11.3), the author, Tuk, writes the first part of his message in Old Novgorodian, even though his addressee is the *posadnik* of Novgorod. Significantly, he switches to the supra-regional variant in an addendum that is graphically demarcated from the main text, in which he reports new findings from his investigation of a high-ranking informant, Ivanko, and members of his family. It seems evident that this shift was motivated by deference to the referent Ivanko.

The sociolinguistic scenario in N907 is reminiscent of the one in N142. Here the author, Esif, uses the local nominative singular masculine *-e*, except when he tells his addressee Onfim what to say to a third party, Mark, in direct speech:

From Esif to Onfim. If Oleksa will send people from Mark to you or to my wife, answer him (Mark) as follows: “As you, Mark, have arranged with me, I have to come out to you on St. Peter’s Day<sup>10</sup> and inspect my village;

10 29 June (St. Peter and Paul’s Day), i.e., mid-summer quarter day (Levin 1997, 149–150; Agapkina 2009); see also N962 (Section 11.4) and N558 (Section 11.5.4).

you have to harvest your rye, and I have to give you interest. And the debt has been given." (...).

(N142, ca. 1300–1320)<sup>11</sup>

It is not coincidental that the sole use of the supra-regional variant occurs in the stretch of direct speech. Esif wants Onfim to serve as his mouthpiece in making a binding declaration, and he gives him a specific text to say, in a specific wording; he evidently chooses the non-local nominative singular<sup>12</sup> to keep with the official tone of the projected speech act.

Sava in N724, Tuk in N907, and Esif in N142 made use of the sociolinguistic registers that were available in medieval Novgorod, and they evidently did so in a purpose-oriented way. The writing of the monk Efreim in N605 shows that Church Slavonic could be part of the mix. These few texts illustrate how complicated and fine-grained the sociolinguistic variation reflected in birchbark letters can be.

11 NGB IV (19–21), VIII (193), DND (536–538). See also Vermeer (1996, 43), Schaeken (201b, 357), Dekker (2018, 98–99, 181).

12 For 'have arranged' Esif writes *dъkъnčalъ*, with the supra-regional ending -ъ, in contrast to the local ending -e in the main text itself, which ends with the sentence 'And I myself (spelled *same*, not *samъ*) will settle the matter with him.'





## PART II

### *Communication in Daily Life*





## Preliminary Remarks

The letters that are included in Part II are only a few of the numerous texts in the corpus that deal with daily life. As was mentioned in Part I, many of the birchbarks survive only in small fragments, whose contents cannot be reconstructed; others, though preserved in their entirety, pose too many philological and linguistic problems to yield coherent, plausible interpretations in our current state of knowledge.

The birchbarks that we discuss in Part II give a vivid impression of daily life in Novgorod and other cities in the northern parts of medieval Russia. They have been selected to represent the full range of genres and the diverse topics that are reflected in the corpus. Judging from the available evidence, birchbark communication was more common in some spheres of activity than in others; we will therefore begin with the circles from which the highest number of birchbarks have survived—commerce and finance; civil and criminal law; and state administration. Other spheres where birchbarks were used, which will be discussed later in this chapter, include estate and household management; church business and practice; and, significantly, learning to read and write. While some of the texts to be discussed can be linked with the kinds of momentous historical events recorded in parchment texts, most are completely mundane and would have been lost if the conditions of preservation had been different.

In Part II, the focus is on how the messages reflect and, conversely, help to constitute the needs of social institutions and important activity types. In Part III (*The Pragmatics of Communication*), the birchbarks will be approached from a different angle. There, the focus will be on the pragmatics of the different phases of individual acts of communication (writing events)—on the interaction between the spoken and written word in both production and reception; on the role(s) of the messenger not only in conveying the texts but also, in many cases, in preparing them or assisting in their interpretation; and, more generally, on how writing on birchbark served to organize social relations and interactions over vast spaces and relatively lengthy intervals of time, in which the direct contact of a compact, orality-based culture was no longer feasible.

## Commerce and Finance

The first birchbark letter to be discussed is a typical list of goods, a genre well represented in the birchbark corpus:

Money: 12 *grivnas* in squirrel skins and in silver. Sable: 4 *grivnas*. In nets, in woolens and in linens: 3 *grivnas*. Bearskin: 2 *grivnas*.

(N722, ca. 1200–1220)<sup>1</sup>

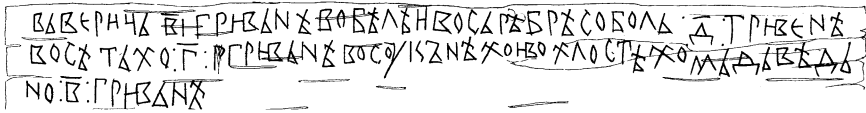


FIGURE 12 Drawing of N722 (list of goods).

At the time this birchbark was written, the *grivna*, a unit of silver that usually took the form of an ingot, and pelts, especially the *kuna* or marten skin, were the chief units of currency. Minted coins fell out of circulation from the twelfth to the second half of the fourteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

It is not always clear what the exact context of lists like these may have been. They could be memoranda of debts to be collected, or they could be freight lists of goods being transported. Some of the lists were (partly) crossed out, apparently because the debts had been paid,<sup>3</sup> which testifies to the ephemeral nature of these records.

We find all kinds of lists, such as registers of wedding gifts (N261–264)<sup>4</sup> and household goods, like in the case of N586:

<sup>1</sup> NGB X (20–21), DND (426).

<sup>2</sup> Janin (2009a, 154–155). For more about the monetary system in medieval Russia, see Janin (1956/2009b; 2001b), Pritsak (1998).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, N992 (NGB XII, 93), which is part of the Jakim network (Section III.5.5), or Staraja Russa 44 (ca. 1400–1410), which was not only crossed out but also torn into small pieces (NGB XII, 175).

<sup>4</sup> The four fragments N261–264 (ca. 1360–1380) list the persons who all gave dishes, and sometimes extra presents such as goatskin, felt cloths, and blue and green textiles (DND 608–611). For an alternative explanation of the precise meaning of ‘dish’ (*bljudo*) in the document, and a possible etymology for the word *čator*, which occurs in one of the entries of the list, see Schaeken (2017b). See also above (Section 1.1.3, fn. 48), on the identification of Terentij Koj, who not only appears in this birchbark list but also in a Hanseatic document from 1331.

From Nežata—cherries and wine and vinegar and flour; Ivan's coat; and a pan.

(N586, ca. 1100–1120)<sup>5</sup>

Another example of this genre is apparently a memorandum of actual or estimated expenditures:

4 *grivnas* for Texon's horse. To his son, a *grivna*. To Mikifor, 5 and a half *kunas* and a *grivna*. To Gjulopinič (Gjulopa's son),<sup>6</sup> 7 *kunas*. To the Pskovian, 8 and a half *kunas*. To Domaško, 8 and a half *rezanas*. For salt, a *kuna*. For fish, 2 *kunas*. For fish oil, 9. From (the price of) fish entrails, 4 *vekšas*.

(Ng26, ca. 1200–1220)<sup>7</sup>

The payments go from most to least expensive; they are first in *grivnas*, then in *kunas* (1 *grivna* = 25 *kunas*), then in *rezanas* (1 *grivna* = 50 *rezanas*), and finally in the smallest known unit of currency, the *vekša* or squirrel skin (1 *grivna* = 150 *vekšas*).<sup>8</sup> Texon's horse thus cost the equivalent of 600 *vekšas*.

The numbers '5 and a half' and '8 and a half' are literally 'half of the sixth' and 'half of the ninth', respectively. Such subtractive counting of fractions was usual in Slavic, including Old Novgorodian; cf. Modern Russian *poltora* 'one and a half' (etymologically, 'half of the second') and German *anderthalb* (etymologically, 'half of the other', i.e., 'of the second').<sup>9</sup>

Near the end of the list, salt is mentioned; this was presumably being used as a preservative, given that the next item on the list is fish, which would have to be salted in order to keep fresh.

Lists like the ones mentioned above are maximally concise and down-to-earth. When we turn to business communication, we can encounter letters in the true sense of the word, i.e., there is an author and an addressee, who are explicitly named, and the letter is not intended as a personal aide-mémoire, but rather to be sent to the addressee:

[+ From Moise]j [to] Spirko. If Matej hasn't taken the batch (of wax) from you, ship it to me with Prus; I've sold off the tin and lead and all the

5 NGB VIII (47–48), DND (266). See also Gippius (2004a, 223), Schaeken (2017a, 128).

6 On the etymology of the name, see Section 1.6.

7 DND (411–412), NGB XII (19–20).

8 Janin (2009a, 154–155).

9 See Fasmer (1987 III, 319).

wrought wares. I no longer have to go to Suzdal'. Of the wax, 3 batches have been bought. You have to come here. Ship some tin—about four lots, about two sheets of the red (copper)—and pay the money immediately.

(N439, ca. 1200–1220)<sup>10</sup>

The sender, Moisej, obviously had a thriving business. He is evidently travelling outside of Novgorod and writing to ask his associate in the city to come to him and, by separate conveyance, send additional goods. Spirko apparently knew where Moisej was to be found, as this is not explicitly communicated in the letter; it may have been obvious from earlier communication, or the letter's messenger might have communicated this orally.<sup>11</sup> The word *kap'* in the first sentence, translated as 'batch', usually denoted a weight unit of wax, though it could occasionally be used for other commodities.<sup>12</sup> Wax was, along with fur, one of the chief items of long-distance trade in medieval Novgorod.

The city of Suzdal' is located approximately six hundred kilometers east of Novgorod as the crow flies; the distance would have been much longer by river. One of the main cities in a different principality of medieval Russia, it controlled a strategic position on the Volga trade route, so it was one of Novgorod's chief competitors and, at times, its military adversary. Nevertheless, this letter shows that trade relations did exist between these cities.

The cross with which N439 starts is quite a usual opening sign in the early birchbark period. It does not necessarily indicate that the author was a cleric or that the letter's contents were related to ecclesiastical affairs. It was rather meant as a reminder of the sacred origin and status of writing, also when used for secular affairs, and can be compared to the physical act of crossing oneself when executing an important matter.<sup>13</sup> Over time, it was abandoned, as wider circles of the population began to write.

The city of Pskov, situated about two hundred kilometers southwest of Novgorod, close to the border with present-day Estonia, was originally a satellite of Novgorod. Pskov became independent towards the end of the thirteenth century, the period in which the following letter was written. It is one of the eight birchbarks that have been unearthed in Pskov so far:

10 NGB VII (41–45), VIII (208), X (109), DND (436–437). See also Franklin (2002, 35–36).

11 For more about the messenger and the extensive role he played in the communication process, see Section III.3.

12 See Pritsak (1998, 57–58, 60–61) about the Khazarian origin of the word. Of the same Khazarian provenance is the word *bezmen*, which is used in N439 to specify the weight units of tin ('about four lots [*bezmene*]').

13 See DND (37), Zaliznjak (1987, 151), Gippius (2012a, 248).

From Kjurik and from Gerasim to Anfim. About the squirrel skin: if you (*plural*) haven't traded (it yet), send (it here) immediately, because squirrel skin is selling well here. And about ourselves: if you (Anfim) are free, come to us; Ksinofont has done us harm. And about this man: we don't know him. In this, (may) God's will (be done), and yours.

(Pskov 6, ca. 1260–1280)<sup>14</sup>

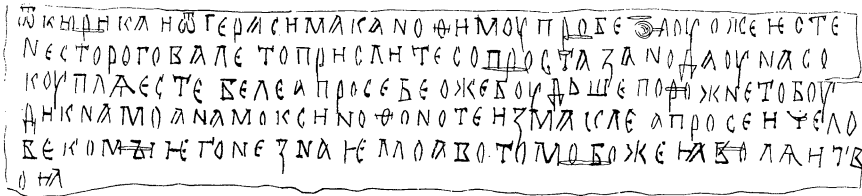


FIGURE 13 Drawing of Pskov 6 ('squirrel skin is selling well here' and 'Ksinofont has done us harm').

Pskov 6 provides several points of interest. Both the physical artifact (neat handwriting and careful trimming) and the textual organization suggest careful planning (as opposed to the unedited writing seen in many other birch-bark letters). Apart from the salutation and the closing formula (see below), the letter is divided into three sections. The first two contain an explicit request plus a rationale; the third contains only a rationale ('we do not know him'), but it is clearly intended as a request or perhaps a warning (viz. not to trust 'this man'). Each of the three sections begins with a heading, consisting of only a prepositional phrase: *pro belu* ('about the squirrel skin'), *a pro sebe* ('and about ourselves'),<sup>15</sup> and *a pro sei čeloveko* ('and about this man'). The identity of 'this man' is not made explicit; in the edition, the phrase

14 Zaliznjak et al. (1993, 196–204), DND (515–517). See also Mendoza (2002, 300), Labutina and Kolosova (2003, 198–204). Interestingly, the fragment Pskov 3, which dates from the same period, seems to start with the same names as Pskov 6: 'From Gerasim to Kjur[...] (...)' (see Labutina and Kostjučuk 1981, 66–70; NGB IX, 178).

15 The translation of the reflexive pronoun *sebe* 'self' as '(about) ourselves' differs from DND (516), where *sebe* is identified with the addressee, Anfim, and translated as '(about) you'. However, the interpretation in DND does not explain the explicit switch of focus, as the previous section also refers to the addressee. Nevertheless, it is quite possible to reconcile both interpretations, since the reflexive pronoun can refer to both the first and the second person simultaneously, in an 'inclusive' reading, i.e., the authors plus the addressee. Since Kjurik and Gerasim are Anfim's partners, the unspecified damage caused by Ksinofont probably affects him as well; thus, the heading can be paraphrased as 'about our common interests'.



is interpreted as an anaphor referring back to Ksinofont in the preceding clause.<sup>16</sup>

The letter ends with the formula, 'In this, (may) God's will (be done), and yours.' The same basic formula appears, with variations, as the closing of several other birchbarks.<sup>17</sup> It conveys that the author is entrusting his welfare to the addressee and that he expects a favorable outcome.

As pointed out in Section 1.1.3, the fur trade was a major source of prosperity for Novgorod, but this letter shows that it also extended to other cities. It remains unclear where the authors of Pskov 6 lived, but the dialect and spelling features seem to be Novgorodian.<sup>18</sup> Nothing prevents us from supposing that it might have been Novgorod itself.

Another city with which Novgorod had trade relations was Staraja Russa. Politically, it was a satellite of Novgorod, and is located a hundred kilometers to the south, where the Lovat' River flows into Lake Il'men'. In the Middle Ages, the city had a thriving salt industry. However, in the following letter from Staraja Russa, the commodity is wine, a product that was imported either from the West (ultimately, the Rhinelands) or from the Byzantine Empire.<sup>19</sup>

A bow from G[ri]gor'ja to Jermola and Ozekej. I have sent to you (*singular*) six barrels of wine, (filled) to a finger's length (from the top). And you check it carefully, and sell them like those others, under the same conditions. *And if you have sold them*, send away the proceeds.<sup>20</sup> And don't give my servants (?) the money; send it along with the debt.

(Staraja Russa 39, ca. 1380–1400)<sup>21</sup>

16 However, the demonstrative *sei* 'this' is often used to refer to entities outside of the text that are of current concern to the participants of the communicative situation. As an alternative explanation, *sei čeloveko* may refer to the messenger who delivered the letter (cf. similar examples like N879 and also Sections 1.7 and 11.3). The request or warning implicit in 'we don't know him' shows that Kjurik and Gerasim have entrusted their letter to a messenger with whom they are not familiar, with whom they do not have dealings, so Anfim should not ask him for further information about Ksinofont. Apparently, they did not want to reveal too much to the messenger.

17 See, for instance, the closing sentence of N311, Section 11.4: 'God's will be done and yours' (cf. NGB VIII, 180–181).

18 See DND (516, and also 49, with reference to the form *izmakle* 'has done harm').

19 Wine is also mentioned in N586 (see above) and N1005 (ca. 1140–1160). The latter is part of the Luka-Ivan network (see Section 11.5.5) and announces the arrival of wine and thirty pieces of glassware from Velikie Luki, about two hundred and fifty kilometers south of Novgorod (NGB XII, 105–106; Schaeken 2017a, 128).

20 'And if you have sold them' is written between the lines in smaller letters.

21 NGB XII (167–170). See also Schaeken et al. (2014, 22–23), Schaeken (2017a, 128), Dekker (2018, 116–117).

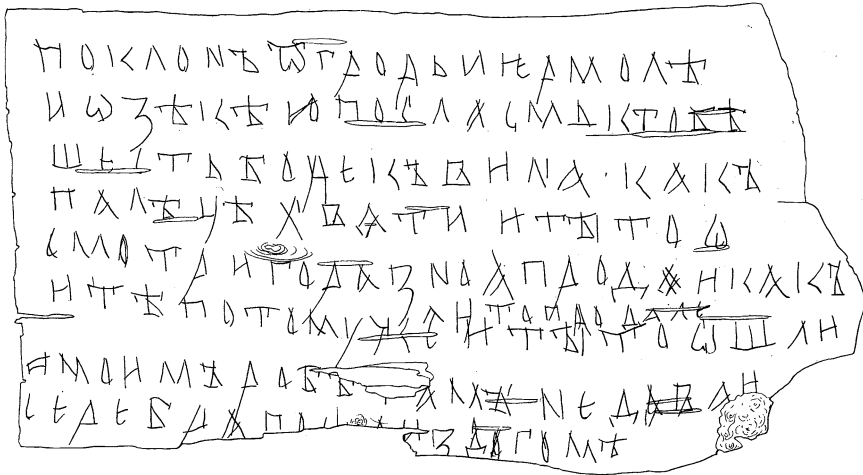


FIGURE 14 Drawing of Staraja Russa 39 ('I have sent to you six barrels of wine').

Two names appear in the greeting formula; however, only one person is addressed (in singular forms) in the body of the letter. It is possible that just one of them is the main addressee (Jermola, who is mentioned first); another option is that Jermola and Ozekej are addressed consecutively.<sup>22</sup> On the question of whether the letter was sent along with the wine and the use of the so-called 'epistolary past tense', see Section 1.7.<sup>23</sup>

The sender of the birchbark, Grigor'ja, wants to ensure that all the wine he is sending actually arrives at its destination, so he specifies the depth to which the barrels are filled ('filled to a finger's length from the top'—literally, 'as the finger reaches [*xvati*]'; cf. Modern Russian *xvatit'* 'reach; be enough').

The use of the form *otošli* 'send away (the proceeds)' might indicate that the proceeds were not to be sent to Grigor'ja. If they were, then the expected form would be *prišli* 'send hither', which occurs quite frequently throughout the birchbark corpus. In addition, it seems that the proceeds should *not* be sent back with the servants who had brought the letter and the six barrels of wine. Having said that, it remains unclear what the debt is and to whom it must be paid.

22 Cf. the notion of communicative heterogeneity in Section III.4.

23 In Staraja Russa 39 the epistolary past tense is expressed by the perfect tense form *poslasmь* 'I have sent'. The alternative interpretation of this unusual form (as well as other so-called *l*-less perfects on birchbark) as an aorist with a person-number marker (Nørgård-Sørensen 2015, 3) is less plausible.

To date, 49 documents have been unearthed in Staraja Russa. It is noteworthy how many of the Staraja Russa texts feature women as authors, addressees, or topics. For example, debt lists have been discovered in the city that consist mostly or exclusively of women's names.<sup>24</sup> The following debt-collection letter from Staraja Russa was obviously authored by a woman, even though her name is not mentioned:

Ivan's wife has said to Fima: "You either send the money, or I will demand that a large fine is imposed on you."

(Staraja Russa 11, ca. 1160–1180)<sup>25</sup>

This letter may provide clues about dictation: 'Ivan's wife has said'. The use of the perfect tense then indicates that she 'said' this to a scribe before he wrote the letter down. This also explains why she does not refer to herself by her own name: the possessive of the husband's name is presumably how the scribe would refer to her. Fima could be the addressee or the scribe/messenger to whom the message was entrusted and who could show the letter to the debtor as proof that Ivan's wife really commissioned him to convey this message. In the latter case, the identity of the addressee would have been clear anyway, and an explicit reference to him would have been considered redundant.

Birchbark correspondence could be maintained over larger distances, and also beyond the territory controlled by Novgorod. In the following letter, Gjurgij is writing from outside the Novgorodian lands, either in Smolensk, four hundred kilometers to the southwest, or in Kiev, an additional five hundred kilometers to the south. (Smolensk would be on the way to Kiev along the Dnieper route.) He is encouraging his parents to move there because of the better economic conditions he has noticed during his travels:

[A letter from Gjurgij to] father and to mother. After selling the farm, come (*plural*) here, either to Smolensk or to Kiev. Grain is cheap. If you don't come, send me a note (saying) whether you are well.

(N424, ca. 1100–1120)<sup>26</sup>

This letter, like many others, gives us a fascinating glimpse into the changing economic conditions of medieval Novgorod. As the soil conditions in the

<sup>24</sup> See esp. Staraja Russa 21, Staraja Russa 22, and Staraja Russa 36 (DND 332–333, 336–339).

<sup>25</sup> NGB VII (151–152), VIII (216), DND (446–447). See also Noonan and Kovalev (2000, 138), Gippius (2004a, 207, 213; 2012a, 243), Dekker (2018, 112, 132, 138, 179).

<sup>26</sup> NGB VII (32–33), VIII (206–207), IX (164), DND (272). See also Sorokin (2009) on the possible precise dating of 1128.

Novgorodian lands could not sustain a large population, many staple food items had to be imported, which made life relatively expensive. The chronicles mention frequent food shortages and famines in the city.

N424 dates from the early twelfth century, when the dual number (referring to two entities) was still robust in Old Novgorodian. Because Gjurgij is writing ostensibly to two addressees, it might be expected that he would use the dual in his directives to his parents; instead, he uses the plural. From this we can deduce that Gjurgij intends his instructions to apply to more than two people; that is, he has the entire household in mind.

A more explicit instruction to a family member is encountered in the following letter:

[From] Petr to Kuz'ma. I have instructed (i.e., hereby instruct) you, my brother, concerning ourselves as follows: whether he has made an arrangement with you or has not made an arrangement, you execute (it) with Dročila according to the agreement. And I bow down.

(N344, ca. 1300–1320)<sup>27</sup>

N344 is the lower layer of a piece of birchbark. The letters are quite faint and difficult to read, so it is clear that the message was inscribed on an upper layer, which is now missing. The upper layer may have been removed intentionally; conceivably, this may have been done by the author if he wanted to keep a copy for himself (see Section 1.4).

In the letter, Petr is giving instructions to his brother Kuz'ma about a deal that has been struck with Dročila. According to the edition, Kuz'ma may have wanted to delay the bargain until they had a written contract with Dročila; Petr is writing to insist that instead they adhere to the verbal arrangement he himself has already made.

The following piece of birchbark really consists of two letters—Ivan's message to Dristliv, written on the outer side of the birchbark (N736a), and Dristliv's response, written on the inner side (N736b):

[Outer side] + From Ivan to Dristliv. If you have collected Pavel's interest-payment, it is also necessary to collect on Prokop'ja. If you've collected (that), then also collect for Z[avi]d (?). And if you've collected, [send] news about whether he's given the entire [amount] (?).

27 NGB VI (31–32), IX (156–157, including a new drawing), DND (526). See also Dekker (2018, 49–50, 138–139). For the inclusive translation of *pro sebe* 'concerning ourselves', see the commentary on Pskov 6 above.

[*Inner side*] From Dristliv to Ivan. I haven't collected a cent, nor have I seen him. I've collected from Prokop'ja only; I collected a *grivna* less one *nogata*.

(N736, ca. 1100–1120)<sup>28</sup>

Layers have been removed from the outer side; the resulting damage accounts for the lacunae in Ivan's message. It seems probable that Dristliv himself removed the upper layers of N736a before sending (perhaps even before writing) his reply so that he would have a memorandum of Ivan's instructions. It is very rare to find both a letter and a reply in the birchbark corpus; another example is N497 (Section III.3).

The 'he' in the last sentence of N736a may refer to either Prokop'ja or Zavid. However, the 'him' in N736b probably refers to Pavel. The role of Zavid remains unclear, anyway. He may have been a debtor, or, conversely, an interest collector. The partial conjecture also does not improve the case.

In emphasizing that he has not collected from or even seen Pavel, Dristliv uses the expression 'not a *vekša*' (in the translation, 'not a cent'). In Old Novgorodian, as in many other languages, emphatic negation of objects denoting money involves the term for the smallest unit of currency—in this case, a *vekša* (cf. N926 above); cf. British English *not a (brass) farthing*, Modern Russian *ni kopejki*, etc. A *nogata*, mentioned at the end of N736b, was worth one-twentieth of a *grivna*.

The following two letters concern the collection of money, from either debtors or trade partners.

From Radoslav to Xoteslav. Collect from the merchant 2 *grivnas* and 5 *kunas*.

Brother Jakov, do your screwing lying down, you horny ballser!

(Staraja Russa 35, ca. 1140–1160)<sup>29</sup>

The second line of this letter, starting with 'brother Jakov', is in a different handwriting than the first. This might suggest that, as in N736, we are dealing with a letter and its response, in this case written on only one side of the birchbark. In this scenario, Xoteslav addresses his brother with his baptismal name (Jakov) rather than the secular name that appears in the opening formula (Radoslav); this misuse of a religious name can be explained as

28 NGBX (35–36), DND (263–265). See also Janin (1995, 223–224), Noonan and Kovalev (2000, 137–138), Mendoza (2002, 301–302), Lazar (2014, 135).

29 NGB XI (117–118), DND (335), XII (273).

sarcasm—an interpretation that fits well with the obscene comment that follows. The phrase ‘you horny ballser’ is a rough translation of two otherwise unattested vocatives, both compound-nouns, which can be broken down as ‘fuck-wanter’ and ‘balls-shover’. Thus, in this interpretation, Xoteslav is lambasting his brother in a very salty manner for foisting a task on him that he does not like.

However, another reading, which is very plausible, has been suggested by A.A. Gippius.<sup>30</sup> This interpretation presupposes that Radoslav dictated the first line to a scribe and then added the colorful second line himself. In this scenario, the baptismal name Jakov belongs not to Radoslav but to Xoteslav, whose name (itself a compound noun) seems to be the subject of a pun in the following way:

	<u>xot-</u>	- <u>e-</u>	- <u>slav-</u>	(name <i>Xoteslav</i> )
<i>eb-e-</i>	- <u>xot-o</u>	<u>ae-</u>	- <u>sov-</u>	(‘fuck’ – ‘want’ – ‘ball’ – ‘shove’)

According to this interpretation, the postscript should be viewed not as an angry rebuke, but as a playful spur to action or expression of mock-impolite solidarity. For humorous effect, Radoslav grotesquely juxtaposes the sacred (his brother’s identity in religion) with the profane (obscurities referring to his brother’s sexual drives).

The following birchbark text is more prosaic:

From Ondrej, three *den’gi*. (From) Ivan, one *den’ga*. From Stepan, one *den’ga*. From Ivan, one *den’ga*. From Zub, a *moskovka*. From Stepan, a *moskovka*.

(N495, second half of 15th century)<sup>31</sup>

Based on archaeological data, N495 is the youngest known birchbark in the corpus; it dates from the late fifteenth century, from the period after Novgorod was annexed by Moscow (1478). It is one of the many lists or registers that are preserved in the corpus. In content, it is a list of debtors. It reflects an economy that had already been monetized; the coins that are mentioned came into use in the second half of the fourteenth century. The *den’ga* (cf. Modern Russian *den’gi* ‘money’) was worth two *moskovki*; the name of the latter is derived from

<sup>30</sup> Gippius (2004a, 228–229).

<sup>31</sup> NGB VII (87–88), DND (683–684).

*Moskva* ‘Moscow’ and bears witness to the growing political and economic dominance of Moscow.<sup>32</sup>

The landmark N1000 was discovered with great fanfare in the Trinity Excavation in Novgorod on July 21, 2010. It was one of 42 birchbarks found in Novgorod that bumper year (N974–N1015):

From Kyas and from Žiročko to Tverdjata and to Ivan. We are both fine.  
(N1000, ca. 1140–1160)<sup>33</sup>



FIGURE 15 Drawing of N1000 ('We are both fine').

At first glance, N1000 seems to contain nothing more than simple greetings from two companions,<sup>34</sup> like a modern postcard sent from a vacation. Such messages, which seemingly have no communicative content other than maintaining interpersonal relations, are rare in the corpus. The vast majority of the surviving birchbarks have substantive content; their authors are clearly writing with specific practical purposes in mind. Nevertheless, when N1000 is compared with other birchbarks found in the same excavation season and later (especially in 2012), it becomes clear that it was not just a postcard saying, 'Having a wonderful time; wish you were here!'

One of the addressees in N1000, Ivan, can be connected with Luka, who is involved (as author or referent) in several other birchbark communications, which will be discussed in Section 111.5.5 (the 'Luka-Ivan network'). For example, Luka and Ivan are the senders of the following letter, which was most probably written down by Ivan:

[From] Luka and from Ivan to Snovid. We are both fine. We've already sold (everything). We didn't buy (any) Greek merchandise. Try to get a little overseas merchandise.

(N1009, ca. 1140–1160)<sup>35</sup>

N1009, along with other birchbark finds, shows that Luka and Ivan were business associates, who were on a long trip away from Novgorod to buy and sell

32 Janin (2009a, 154–155).

33 NGB XII (99–100).

34 On the origin of the name Kyas, see Section 1.6.

35 NGB XII (109–110).

goods. They evidently traded in foreign merchandise; the ‘Greek merchandise’ that they mention concerns imports from the Byzantine Empire or its colonies on the Black Sea, while the ‘overseas merchandise’ refers to products from North-Western Europe, presumably coming through the Baltic Sea (the default ‘sea’ in Old Novgorodian texts).

The collective impression created by N1000, N1009, and the other letters that mention Luka, Ivan and Snovid is that these men were not just business associates but members of a single family; Luka and Ivan seem to be brothers, and Snovid may have been their father. The latter may be the same as the prospective bridegroom Snovid mentioned in N955, a marriage negotiation from 1140–1160, also found on the Trinity site (see Section 11.5).

When we compare N1000 with the other birchbarks written in this social network, it seems less and less like a trivial interpersonal communication (a ‘postcard’) and more and more like a business letter similar to N1009. In communications of this kind, every statement has some bearing on the shared business of the correspondents. Thus, it seems probable that the phrase ‘We are both fine’ in N1000, as in N1009, is not merely a personal touch, but rather a substantive report meant to convey that the authors are fulfilling their mission, which is known to their addressees—in other words, that their mutual concerns are prospering.

We will now turn to some smaller notes on birchbark. At first sight, it is not always immediately obvious how these little documents are connected to commerce and finance. Birchbark N1052 only consists of a drawing and four characters to the right, separated by vertical strokes:



FIGURE 16 Drawing of N1052 (referring to an *ansyr*’ of silk).

36 NGB XII (152–153). See also Schaeken (2017a, 130).



As every letter of the alphabet also had a numerical value, it is reasonable that these signs should be understood as a sequence of numbers, viz. ‘8, 70, 20, 30’. The sum of these is 128. This number has been interpreted as referring to the *ansyr*, a weight unit consisting of 128 *zlotniks*, which was used to weigh silk, as mentioned in N288:

(...) A *zlotnik* of green silk, another (*zlotnik*) of red (silk), a third (*zlotnik*) of green-yellow (silk) (...)

(N288, ca. 1320–1340)<sup>37</sup>

It was therefore suggested that N1052 refers to different colors of silk in the same way as N288. The sense can then be rendered as follows: ‘an *ansyr*’ of silk, made up of four colors.’ This, in turn, led to a reanalysis of a letter that has been known for three decades, but was still lacking a credible interpretation up to now:

Minus two thirty to one hundred in the simple, and in the other 100 minus four.

(N686, ca. 1160–1180)<sup>38</sup>

In its English translation, this birchbark looks more enigmatic than in the original. The seemingly awkward arithmetic sum was a usual way of denoting larger numbers, so in a more natural translation it can be rendered as follows: ‘128 in the simple, and in the other 96.’

But even then, the contents remain puzzling. However, from other medieval sources, we know that the *ansyr* was calculated according to two different standards: it consisted of either 128 or 96 *zlotniks*. Knowing this puts N686 in a totally new light; it can be paraphrased as follows: ‘The “simple” (*ansyr*) consists of 128 (*zlotniks*), the “other” (*ansyr*) consists of 96 (*zlotniks*).’

The new interpretation of this birchbark illustrates how making sense of the birchbark letters is an ongoing process, and how our knowledge is built up as the successive excavations seasons yield new fruits. Thus, it took thirty years to obtain a plausible interpretation of N686, thanks to the discovery in 2014 of a tiny piece of birchbark with only four characters on it (N1052).

37 NGB V (115–118), DND (541), NGB XII (153).

38 NGB IX (70–71), DND (383), NGB XII (256–257). See also Schaeken (2017a, 130).

## Law and Administration

From the very earliest times of birchbark attestations, issues of law and order were a considerable burden that needed to be addressed:

[...] accuses this (man) (of theft of property worth) 40 *rezanas*. But the lock is intact, the door is intact, and the master for that reason is not pursuing damages. So fine that false accuser, and the bishop is to take from this peasant [...] (should) the peasants beat the false accuser [...].

(N247, ca. 1025–1050)<sup>1</sup>

This is one of the two oldest known birchbark letters, along with N246 (see below). Its beginning and end are missing, and the final sentence is not grammatically complete, due to lacunae on the lower left and right of the birchbark.

N247 is a report of a judicial investigation into a case in which a free peasant (*smerd*)<sup>2</sup> has been accused of burglary. The author, a court official, first outlines the accusation, then reports that there is no sign of forced entry and that the owner of the property is not pressing charges; thus, writing to another official who is responsible for executing the verdict, the court official orders that the false accuser be penalized.<sup>3</sup>

It is not strange that the bishop of Novgorod is mentioned, as he had not only religious but also important civic responsibilities (see Section 1.1.2). Obviously, in the context of N247, the bishop was acting as the judge in the trial; he was therefore to receive fees from the exonerated free peasant, in accordance with known norms of medieval law.

Another document also clearly shows that the bishop held combined spiritual and political powers:

1 NGB V (69–71), VIII (240), IX (149), DND (239–240). See also Gippius (2012a, 237–238). For linguistic commentary, see Section 1.7.

2 A *smerd* is a peasant or artisan who pays tribute directly to the state, not to a feudal lord (DND 239).

3 The use of the demonstrative pronouns ‘this (man)’ (*sego*) and ‘that (false accuser)’ (*togo*) may indicate that the peasant who was wrongly accused is the carrier of the letter, which is some sort of instruction for the person who has to execute the verdict. See similar examples, such as N879, and also Sections 1.7 and 11.3.

From Remša, a bow to Klimjata and to Pavel. For God's sake let anyone (of you two) go to the archbishop. Tell the archbishop about my shame and my beating (and) chains. And I owe him nothing. And I entreat you (both).

(N725, ca. 1080–1200)<sup>4</sup>

One of the addressees, Klimjata, can be identified as the brother of Ana, who in an emotional letter (N531) asks Klimjata to take action in a conflict between her and Kosnjatin (see Section 11.5). N725 confirms that Klimjata was an influential figure who could assist in legal affairs and had direct access to the archbishop.

Several hypotheses have been advanced to explain the scenario reflected in the following letter:

A letter from Žiznomir to Mikula. You bought a slave-woman in Pskov. Now the princess (i.e., the Pskovian prince's wife) has arrested me in that (matter), and (my) companions have gone surety for me. So now send a letter to that man: does he have the slave-woman? And here is what I will do: after buying horses and mounting one of the prince's men, then on to the hearing. And you, if you haven't collected that money, don't take anything from him.

(N109, ca. 1100–1120)<sup>5</sup>

The most plausible hypothesis is that the addressee, Mikula, a citizen of Novgorod,<sup>6</sup> bought a slave woman in Pskov, left that city, then sold her to a third party ('that man'). Subsequently, some citizen of Pskov claimed that the slave had been stolen from him, so the Pskovian authorities, in accordance with the established legal practice, are holding another citizen of Novgorod, Žiznomir, liable in his stead. Žiznomir was initially imprisoned for the alleged crime of his fellow Novgorodian, but his travelling companions put up bail for him. He is now writing to ask Mikula to trace the slave's current whereabouts. He plans to obtain the assistance of a highly ranked official ('prince's man'), who will accompany him on horseback to the hearing (*svod*), in which he will try to prove that Mikula's purchase was made in good faith.

4 NGB X (26–27), DND (415), NGB XII (268). See also Noonan and Kovalev (2000, 140), Mendoza (2002, 302; 2016, 129), Dekker (2018, 90).

5 NGB III (38–41), VIII (190), DND (257–259). See also Freydank et al. (1999, 521), Mendoza (2002, 295–296, 299).

6 According to Burov (1988), Mikula can be identified as a *posadnik* of Novgorod in the early twelfth century.

In the next letter, the unknown recipient bought a slave girl from Domaslav on credit; he either told Domaslav that the author, Poločko, would pay, or Poločko, as a fellow Novgorodian, was forced to pay the recipient's debt (a scenario similar to the one in N109). Poločko is writing to bill the recipient for the payment; he warns him that he will face legal action and a steeper fine if he does not pay up:

+ From Poločko to [...]. [After you] took the girl from Domaslav, Domaslav collected 12 *grivnas* from me. Send 12 *grivnas*. If you don't send them, I will be obliged to stand before the prince and archbishop, and (you) should prepare for a bigger loss [...].

(N155, ca. 1160–1180)<sup>7</sup>

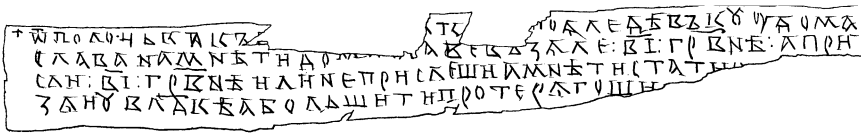


FIGURE 17 Drawing of N155 (about a slave girl bought on credit).

As Figure 17 shows, the missing piece of the first line is exactly where the name of the addressee should be following the preposition 'to'. This illustrates a well-attested practice—anonymization, i.e., mutilating the opening formula to conceal the identity of the recipient, and sometimes also that of the author (cf. 'blinding' in modern documents). Another, perhaps less secure way in which this was done was by tearing the birchbark into strips (cf. N752, Section 11.5). In N881,<sup>8</sup> the author specifically tells the addressee to destroy the letter after reading it: '(...) And, after tearing up the letter (...)' While we obviously cannot know how widespread such 'document shredding' was, it is worth noting how many of the birchbark letters are preserved only in small fragments.

The following two examples relate to conflicts over the non-payment of debts:

From Kosnjatin to Ždan. Pay Stepanec before Christmas. If you don't pay (by then), it will be double that amount (that you'll spend) on the official (sent to enforce the debt-collection).

(N241, ca. 1100–1120)<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> NGB IV (34–36), DND (381–382).

<sup>8</sup> NGB XI (83), DND (341).

<sup>9</sup> NGB V (63–64), IX (146–148, including a new drawing), DND (260). See also Noonan and Kovalev (2000, 139), Gippius (2004a, 200).

The author of the letter, Kosnjatin, has been identified as the *posadnik* Konstantin Mikul'čič, who also appears to feature in N397 (Section III.3). Furthermore, the word translated as 'official' is *otrok*, etymologically 'lad', which had two meanings in eleventh- and twelfth-century Old Novgorodian: 'servant' and, by extension, 'junior official, a type of judicial functionary'. Such officials could accompany higher officials but more frequently worked on their own.<sup>10</sup> When they were engaged in collecting debts for creditors, they also demanded a fee, which had to be paid by the debtor. Thus, Kosnjatin is giving Ždan a stern reminder that, if he delays any longer, his expenses will be much greater.

In content, N241 seems very similar to Staraja Russa 15 (see Section III.4).<sup>11</sup> If this comparison is valid, N241 is not just a dunning letter but also a warrant given to a third-party collection agent; Kosnjatin would have given the letter to Stepanec, who would then have presented it to Ždan to prove that he had the right to collect the debt.

N246 is one of the oldest surviving birchbark letters, along with N247 (see above):

From Žirovit to Stojan. It is the ninth year since you swore on the Cross in my presence, but you haven't sent me the money. If you don't send me four and a half *grivnas*, I'll have the property of the most distinguished Novgorodian confiscated on your account. Better send (the money) in a proper way.

(N246, ca. 1025–1050)<sup>12</sup>

This letter must have been sent from some city outside the Novgorodian lands, since it refers to a well-established legal procedure called *rubež* or 'confiscation' (see also N952, Section III.2). This procedure was used when a non-citizen left town without paying a debt; in accordance with the medieval notion of collective responsibility, the creditor had the right to seize the assets of a prominent visitor from the defaulter's city (hence 'the most distinguished Novgorodian') in compensation for the unpaid debt. In N246, Žirovit does not mention the name of his city, but internal linguistic evidence shows that it

10 SRJa XI–XVII 14 (19–20), DND (260).

11 N241 has the 'standard' communicative constellation, as opposed to the communicatively heterogeneous text Staraja Russa 15. See Section III.4 for more on communicative heterogeneity.

12 NGB V (67–69), IX (149), DND (280–281), XII (216). See also Freydank et al. (1999, 519), Noonan and Kovalev (2000, 142), Gippius (2012a, 237).

must have been outside the Novgorodian dialect zone—perhaps Smolensk, Vitebsk, or Polock.<sup>13</sup>

The phrase translated as ‘swore on the Cross’ reads literally ‘took the Holy wood’. This can be interpreted as a form of oath, which the addressee (Stojan) took when borrowing a sizeable loan from the author. However, this interpretation is not without its problems, as no parallel to the expression ‘Holy wood’ is attested in the birchbark corpus or indeed elsewhere. It has therefore been suggested that a literal cross is meant, a valuable religious object that Žirovit sold to Stojan.<sup>14</sup>

Like the first letter discussed in this section (N247), N907 is a report by an official, Tuk, who is conducting a judicial investigation:

[*Outer side*] A letter from Tuk to Gjurjata. The brother’s serfs have stolen, (they have stolen) from his brother. And now he (the landlord) has plotted with the relatives; he has shifted (everything) on this theft, instead of (telling about) that theft.

And from him (in his district) there has been stolen indeed, but in fact he has taken from Ivanko’s peasant three *grivnas* and has concealed the theft of the princely property.

[*Inner side*] And from him [...].

(N907, ca. 1100–1120)<sup>15</sup>

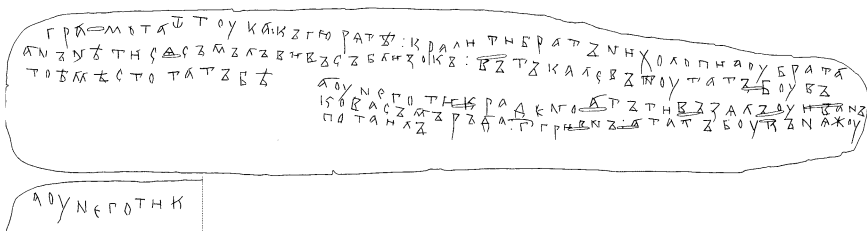


FIGURE 18 Drawing of outer and inner side of N907 (report of a judicial investigation).

Figure 18 shows that on the outer side of the birchbark, the last three lines are demarcated graphically from the first three; clearly the indentation is used to divide the text into two separate parts. The inner side contains the beginning of a phrase *a u nego ti k* [...] ‘And from him [...]’. This fragment corresponds precisely to the beginning of the indented portion on the outer side. Obviously,

13 See DND (280).

14 Gippius (2012a, 237).

15 NGB XI (99–101), DND (255–257). See also Schaecken (201b).

the writer began to write the second part on the inner side, but then decided that it would be better placed under the first part, on the outer side. Thus, despite the fragment on the inner side, the text is preserved in its entirety; there are no lacunae, and there is ample room at the bottom of the outer side, which the writer could have used if he had needed to add additional information.

It is significant that the graphic division of the text corresponds to a linguistic division. This points to two separate writing events; in other words, the writer (probably Tuk himself) wrote the message in two phases, which is reflected in the two parts. The first part is written in the local dialect of Novgorod, whereas the second part is written in the supra-regional form of Old East Slavic (cf. N589 below, Section III.2, and the discussion in Section I.7).

The interpretation of N907 is complicated. The report takes for granted that the reader knows the identity of a person who is not named explicitly (hereafter *X*). *X* is evidently a functionary with responsibility, or indeed liability, for the prince's property. As Tuk notes in the second part of his message, a peasant who works for a certain Ivanko has stolen some of the property, with *X*'s connivance. Instead of dutifully reporting the theft, *X* has taken three *grivnas* from the peasant, either as hush money or as a fine that he has kept for himself rather than passing it on to the prince. However, the theft has somehow come to light, and the official Gjurjata, the prince's regent, has sent his subordinate Tuk to investigate the case.

In the first part of N907, Tuk reports to Gjurjata on his investigation of an earlier theft, which took place in *X*'s family compound; his brother had property stolen by some of his own servants. *X* has used this as a red herring to conceal the theft of princely property, which he has blamed on the errant servants. *X* has apparently conspired with some of his family members to cover up his own crime.

Tuk's investigation involves some of the most prominent citizens of Novgorod in the early twelfth century. His superior Gjurjata Rogovič was a leading boyar, who served as a *posadnik* somewhere between the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the 1210s (the exact years are unknown).<sup>16</sup> Ivanko may well be Ivanko Pavlovič, who was the *posadnik* in 1134–1135; he also figures elsewhere on birchbark (see Sections I.1.2 and III.5.2).

The next letter also concerns law and justice, although the nature of the crime remains unclear:

<sup>16</sup> Janin (2003, 88), DND (256).

From Mirslav to Olisej Grečin. Gavko, a resident of Polock, is coming. Ask him where he is lodging. If he has seen how I arrested Ivan, place him before the witnesses that he mentions.

(N502, ca. 1180–1200)<sup>17</sup>

N502 was found on the site of a late twelfth-century compound, along with several other letters with the same addressee, Olisej, who had the curious nickname Grečin ‘the Greek’ (see Section III.5.4 for the social network of Olisej Petrovič Grečin). In the present birchbark, Olisej is seen in the role of a judicial investigator in a case against a certain Ivan. Elsewhere, he appears in a different social role—as a priest and icon painter (cf. N549, Section II.7).<sup>18</sup> As we already saw in N247 and N725 (see above), the clergy in medieval Novgorod could also be active in civic functions.

The author Mirslav is assumed to be the same person as the *posadnik* Miroška Nesdinič, a prominent boyar of the same period.<sup>19</sup> Gavko is clearly a recent arrival (perhaps a visiting merchant) from Polock, three hundred and fifty kilometers southwest of Novgorod, in present-day Belarus (Polack); this independent principality was an important commercial center on the trade routes to the west and, at times, a military rival of Novgorod.

The next letter provides a valuable illustration of the use of birchbark and parchment documents in legal matters:

A bow from Petr to Mar’ja. I mowed the pasture, and the inhabitants of Ozero took the hay away from me. Write a copy from the purchase-deed and send it here, so that I know what (boundaries) the deed indicates.

(N53, ca. 1320–1340)<sup>20</sup>

The toponym Ozero could refer to several different locales in the Novgorodian lands, so it is impossible to pinpoint precisely where Petr is writing from. However, given the urgency of the matter, it seems likely that he is counting on both a speedy delivery and a rapid response; thus, the Ozero in question

17 NGB VII (96–99), VIII (211), IX (174), DND (405–406). See also Gippius (2012a, 240), Dekker (2018, 79–80).

18 See Janin (1995, 221–223; 1998, 287–299), Gippius (2005b; 2012a, 239–240).

19 See Gippius (2004b, 174–179), and also Sections I.1.2 and III.5.4. It should be noted that Miroška is the diminutive of the name Mirslav; it was not uncommon for prominent people to be referred to by hypocoristics (cf. N186, Section III.4).

20 NGB II (56–57), DND (540). See also Goehrke (1974, 366–367), Levin (1983, 162; 1989a, 130; 2015, 268), Freydank et al. (1999, 524).



must have been relatively close to Novgorod, or else there must have been a relatively quick way of communication.

The 'purchase-deed' from which he needs a copy is a well-attested text type, the *kupčaja gramota* (literally, 'purchase document'), which had a fairly standardized formulaic structure. Such deeds were generally written on parchment; however, there is an example on birchbark, N318 (ca. 1340–1360).<sup>21</sup> Some of the cases where legal documents are attested on birchbark are clearly rough drafts for later parchment deeds (cf. N831, Section 1.4). N53 suggests another possibility: some of the birchbark legal documents may actually have been copies, made from already ratified official parchments. Birchbark was not only readily available, but also a sensible material for this purpose; parchment would have been prohibitively expensive for non-archival (personal, single-use) copies, and the owners would undoubtedly have wanted to have their parchment originals in safekeeping.

Another letter in which a document is mentioned is the following:

A bow from Oncifor to Grandmother Maren'jana. I gave you, my lady, a *poltina* (half a rouble). You should give (it) to the *birič* (court-official) and obtain the document. If you have already obtained the document, give (it) to Ontan; if you [have not yet obtained] (?) the document [...].  
(N578, ca. 1360–1380)<sup>22</sup>

Like N53, N578 testifies to the important role of legal documents in daily life, at least for the Novgorodian elite in the fourteenth century. The 'document', along with the money to be paid to the *birič*, seems to be connected with a lawsuit or other judicial action that has already taken place.<sup>23</sup> The fragmentary state of the letter leaves the precise nature of the judicial action in doubt.

Apparently, Maren'jana knew what kind of document Oncifor wanted her to obtain. The assumption of such shared background knowledge is typical of communication on birchbark. It is a good example of the context-dependence of many birchbark letters. They were never meant for anyone other than the original addressee, so there was no need to make the message more explicit. The consequence is that we do not really know what the transaction is all

21 NGB V (151–153), VIII (245–246), IX (186–189), DND (611–612).

22 NGB VIII (42–43, 215), DND (570–571). For chronological reasons, the sender of N578 cannot be the same Oncifor as in N354 and N358 (Section III.4); cf. NGB X (428).

23 The term *birič* is translated into Latin as *custos* in a German-Novgorodian treaty of 1268: 'custos qui dicitur biriz' (see Goetz 1916, 121, 260).

about. After all, as modern readers, we are never anything but ‘eavesdroppers’ when reading birchbark letters.

In the same vein, we can only conjecture for what specific reason the son who figures in the following letter failed to go home:

+ From Bratjata to Nežil. Go home, son; you are free. If you aren’t going, I’ll send a court-official (*jabetnik*) to get you. I paid the 20 *grivnas*, and you are free.

(N421, ca. 1120–1140)<sup>24</sup>

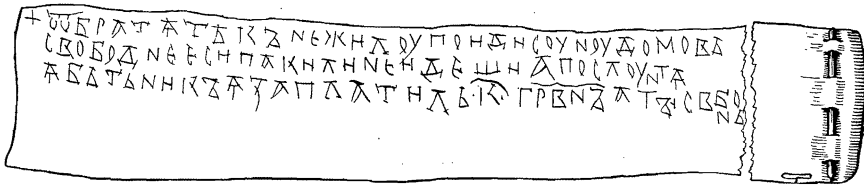


FIGURE 19 Drawing of N421 ('Go home, son; you are free').

Medieval Russian law preferred financial sanctions (fines and compensation) to other forms of punishment. Clearly, the addressee, Nežil, has committed a felony (or felonies)—perhaps battery or the murder of a female relation, for which a twenty-*grivna* fine is specified in the legal code (*Russkaja Pravda*).<sup>25</sup> His father Bratjata, the author of the letter, has assumed his liability and paid the fine. However, he obviously wants to get his money back in some form, so he sternly threatens to send a high court official to arrest Nežil if he does not return home voluntarily. Judging from the letter’s dialect features, Bratjata is himself a Novgorodian. The fact that he and Nežil are not together can be interpreted in two ways: either Bratjata is out of town himself, or Nežil is out of town, but for some reason Bratjata did not send the letter.

As can be seen in the drawing (Figure 19), the writer of N421 only uses the upper left portion of the birchbark. He leaves a large space (approximately 15 cm) to the right, and he has more or less justified the right margin of his message; thus, even though he has space to write the last word (*svobonь*, i.e., *svobodnye* ‘free’) on a single line, he has broken it at the margin and written the last two letters underneath. He also leaves a large space below his message. We do not know why he did not trim the letter. Conceivably, it could have been because, in accordance with the second scenario mentioned above, the letter

<sup>24</sup> NGB VII (29–30), DND (293).

<sup>25</sup> See Grekov (1940, 114).

was never sent, perhaps because Nežil was in hiding and Bratjata did not know where to direct the messenger. It is also conceivable that he did not trim the letter because he wanted to leave space for a reply, which would be brought back by the same messenger (cf. N497, Section III.3).

In the next document we are dealing with a report of a judicial investigation, in which the words of the witness are given in direct speech.

[*Inner side*] The court officials have interrogated Omant (about the fact that) Fi[li]pp started a lawsuit against Ivan Stojko. (Omant said:) “I have seen and heard (what happened) between Filipp (and) Ivan. Filipp gave Stojko 3 roubles in silver and 7 *grivnas kun* and a horse.” Stojko is going to deal with the matter under oath with the *posadnik* and the centurions (*sockii*). And this happened today, at Easter (literally: on Great Day).

[*Outer side*] And this happened in the settlement (*pogost*), on the market.

(N154, ca. 1420–1430)<sup>26</sup>

The witness, Omant, confirms that Filipp gave a large amount of money and a horse (a valuable commodity in medieval Russia) to Ivan Stojko. The term *sockij* ‘centurion’ originally denoted a military commander, and later a type of official who played an important administrative role in Novgorod. At the end of the text, the writer notes the time and place of the hearing. To our modern minds, ‘at Easter’ and especially ‘in the settlement’ would seem a rather imprecise designation. In communication on birchbark, however, less precise designations were deemed acceptable; this testifies to a higher degree of context-dependence, where the exact meaning of a message could be determined orally, in interaction with participants such as the messenger or scribe.<sup>27</sup>

Due to a general lack of punctuation, it is also not fully clear where Omant’s report begins and ends. This is another aspect on which the birchbark letters tend to be relatively vague, compared with our standards.

The same phenomenon can be seen even more clearly in the next letter, which is a report of an eyewitness testimony in some kind of judicial hearing:

I only have to say this. Oleksej has called me to the threshing-floor because Ostaška was threshing the spring rye. Oleksej asked him: “Why are

26 NGB IV (31–33), VIII (194, 230–231), DND (672–673). See also Gippius and Schaeken (2011, 21–22), Dekker (2018, 87).

27 See Section III.2 for a discussion of the ‘orality factor’.

you threshing without our farmers? Half of the land and part of the grain is ours.” (Ostaška answered:) “My boss has ordered me to thresh all your grain (literally: your grain for sowing and for consumption),” (i.e.) Ivan.  
(N755, ca. 1380–1400)<sup>28</sup>

The unknown witness, who is quoted in direct speech, recounts a confrontation between Ostaška and Oleksej, each of whom belongs to a different side in the legal conflict. From a linguistic point of view, it is significant that the witness quotes Ostaška's statement without demarcating it explicitly from the question that precedes it (e.g., by an introductory clause like ‘And Ostaška said/answered’). No coherent reading is possible unless we assume that there is an implicit shift from one represented speaker to another. Such free direct speech is attested elsewhere in the birchbark corpus (see N154 above, and Tver’ 5, Section 11.4), and it is also known in medieval Russian trial transcripts in other media.<sup>29</sup> There is good reason, on linguistic grounds, to assume that the final word of letter N755, *Ivane* ‘Ivan’, belongs to the witness's own narrative rather than to the direct speech of either Oleksej or Ostaška; in other words, the witness is adding a comment to clarify what he has just quoted, viz. who the ‘boss’ is.

Another report concerns a more serious crime:

Žiznobud has been killed by (or ‘among’) the Syčeviči; (he was) a Novgorodian peasant. And they have (his) inheritance as well.  
(N607/562, ca. 1075–1100)<sup>30</sup>

This brief but complete report of the murder of the free peasant Žiznobud was found in two separate parts with a five-year interval. The first (N562), containing the second and third lines of the birchbark, was excavated in 1977; the second (N607), containing the beginning of the text, was only discovered in 1982. It was not until 1992 that the two parts were recognized as a single text.<sup>31</sup>

Like the two preceding letters (N154 and N755), N607/562 lacks an opening formula, so neither the sender nor the intended recipient is identified. However, judging from its content, the author was probably a court official writing to his superior(s). Another possibility is that the author was a private party,

28 NGB X (52–54), DND (636–638), NGB XII (269–270). See also Gippius and Schaeken (2011, 21–22), Schaeken (2011b, 358), Dekker (2018, 87), Faccani (2017, 181–182).

29 See Collins (2001, 92–103, 167–171).

30 NGB VIII (32, 69, 71), DND (245).

31 NGB X (3).

who is writing to the court to report the crime; that would make the letter a form of declaration.

The precise meaning of 'Syčeviči' is uncertain. It could be either a term for the inhabitants of a place, e.g., the village of Syčevo, approximately a hundred and fifty kilometers northeast of Novgorod; or otherwise a plural patronymic denoting a family, the Syčeviči.

Another frequently encountered legal issue is the collection of tribute. This was an especially flourishing source of income for Novgorod from the vast northeastern hinterlands it had acquired by the fourteenth century, where tribute had to be paid in kind, such as pelts. However, in the earlier period we also find evidence of tax collection:

From Domagost' to Xoten. At Ezesk they have assigned (me) forty-five *grivnas* (to collect), and I'm going to remain here. Send another man to Volčino.

(N902, ca. 1100–1120)<sup>32</sup>

Apart from N902, there are two other letters in the corpus that are addressed to the same person called Xoten (cf. N912, Section 1.5). His name also appears on two so-called cylinder seals, which were found on the same site as the three birchbarks. On one of these we only find his name (Figure 20), on the other he is said to be a *mečnik*, literally, 'swordsman'—an official responsible for collecting taxes in the prince's name.

Cylinder seals were hollow pieces of wood, used to secure bags of fur or other commodities gathered as taxes or tribute; the ends of the bags were drawn through the holes in the wood and then tied together. Such seals could include inscriptions like princely signs, owner marks, or short texts stating the name of the tax collector, the location where the taxes were gathered, etc.<sup>33</sup>

The places mentioned in N902 are located between two hundred and fifty and three hundred kilometers east of Novgorod. Obviously, Domagost' has been deputed to collect taxes in two places, but he has discovered that his task in Ezesk needs to be extended, so he writes to ask Xoten to find someone else to send to Volčino.

The collection of tribute often caused conflicts:

+ A bow from Petr to Ovrām. To Matvej you said, "I'm supposed to collect just so much; don't make me responsible for collecting any more tribute."

32 NGB XI (94–95), DND (247).

33 On wooden cylinder seals, see DND (276–278), NGB XI (137–145), Franklin (2002, 80–81), Janin (2001a, 93–150; 2007), Gippius (2012a, 228–230).

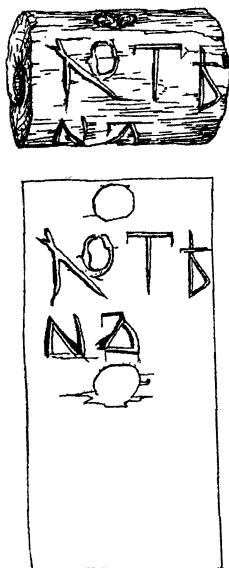


FIGURE 20

Cylinder seal no. 15 with the name Xoten.

Note: After Janin (2001a, 122). On no. 15 and no. 21 (including the word *mečnik*), see Janin (2001a, 98–101, 127; 2007, 206) and NGB XI (142–144).

And the fishermen claim to have given four *grivnas* to Sbyslav, and of the settlement tribute 15 *grivnas*. Gotilo will be with me; the people from Dorogani have gone to the city.

(N550, ca. 1180–1200)<sup>34</sup>

Like many other birchbarks, N550 is difficult to understand not because of its grammar or lexicon but because it begins *in medias res*, assuming background knowledge that is inaccessible to the modern reader and would also have been inscrutable for a medieval Novgorodian who was not engaged in the same enterprise. The scenario put forward in the edition is as follows: Matvej, who has authority over Ovrām, has told Petr that Ovrām has refused to collect taxes beyond a certain amount. Ovrām has authority over Sbyslav. Certain tributary people are claiming that they have already paid their tribute to Sbyslav. Petr is reproaching Ovrām for allowing his subordinate to collect more than the assigned amount.

The author of N550 can perhaps be identified as the prominent boyar Petr Mixalkovič, who is the author, the addressee, or a topic in several other birchbark letters dating from the 1130s–1170s.<sup>35</sup> Petr's social network is discussed in

34 NGB VIII (19, 23–24, 214–215), DND (401–402), NGB XII (250). See also Franklin (1985, 19–20), Ankudinov (2014), Mendoza (2002, 297–298; 2016, 128), Dekker (2018, 84).

35 DND (401) identifies him as such but also hints at some linguistic caveats concerning Petr's identity. In addition, the greeting *poklanjanie* 'a bow' shows deference, which would

Section III.5.3; see also III.5.4, which examines the network of Petr's son, Olisej Petrovič Grečin, whom we already encountered in N502 (see above).

The term for 'tribute' used at the beginning of N550 is *skot*, a prehistoric loanword from Germanic, which also denotes 'cattle' (its meaning in Modern Russian). This semantic shift has parallels in other Indo-European languages because of the use of livestock as the primary exchange commodity; cf. Latin *pecunia* 'money, property', derived from *pecus* 'cattle, livestock'.<sup>36</sup>

The last type of (semi-)formal documents to be discussed in this section is that of last wills. The following exceptionally large text, one of the longest in the corpus (176 words), is written on two big pieces of birchbark:

[N519] I, God's servant Moisej, hereby write a testament at the end of my life. And I bequeath my living to my children, the Sosna property and the property beyond the Sosna, in accordance with the property-division writ, and the property beyond the Šelon', where Matfej and Tarasija's children and I (each) have a third, and my third of the Všaġa property, and the Kromsko property, and my third at Vyškovo. And the documents about Vyškovo are in the keeping of Jurij the priest of St. Elijah's, and the documents about Sosna are in the keeping of Tarasija's children. And the Požarišča property (I bequeath to my children), and the documents are in the keeping of Luka Stepanov. And my children (themselves) I put under the guardianship of Vasilij Esifovič<sup>37</sup> and Maksim Vasil'evič, and the heads of my family (and) my clan. If there is no survivor among my children (at the time of my decease), then my share of the land beyond the Šelon' (goes) to St. Nicholas at Strupino, and the Sosna property to Tarasija's children, and the Skutovo property to Matfej and his cousin Grigorij, and the Kromsko and Vyškovo property to the Holy Mother of God at Dubrovno and the Požarišča property to my father-in-law Kostjantin.

[N520] And my house in the city and my stubble-field at Glušica and the other one beyond Gorodišče, that (goes) to Danilo's children. And I do not owe anyone anything, except my soul to God. And to that God is

---

mean that Petr is not socially superior to Ovram. This deferential opening formula does not appear in other letters known to be from Petr Mixalkovič (though it does appear in letters to him). All in all, some doubts remain about identifying Petr in N550 as the boyar Petr Mixalkovič.

36 See Fasmer (1987 III, 655), De Vaan (2008, 454).

37 On the identification of Vasilij Esifovič, see above, Section I.1.3.

witness, and my spiritual father, Abbot Demid of St. Nicholas, and the priest Ofonos of the Holy Mother of God.

(N519/520, ca. 1400–1410)<sup>38</sup>

Apart from this last will and testament, there is one other find (N521) connected with the same author—a large birchbark that contains four separate texts, which has been called ‘Moisej’s notebook’. The first of these texts, which is unique in the corpus, seems to be a steamy lyrical spell:

Thus may your heart be enflamed, and your body, and your soul, towards me and towards my body and towards the sight of me.

(N521, ca. 1400–1410)<sup>39</sup>

Though it was found rolled up with the will, Moisej’s notebook is written in a different hand. It was probably written by Moisej himself, given the contents, while N519/520 was probably written by his spiritual father, in accordance with the usual medieval custom. There is linguistic evidence for this in the very first line of the will, where there seems to be a sudden shift from Moisej’s first person to the third person,<sup>40</sup> which reflects the perspective of the person to whom he was dictating.

All the toponyms in N519, the first sheet of the testament, are located southwest of Lake Il’men’, around the Šelon’ River, several dozen kilometers from Novgorod. (Many of the place names in the translation are expressed not by nouns but by denominal adjectives, so it is not always clear what the original toponym was.)

Besides N519/520 and also N692 (see Section 11.7), a handful of other last wills have been preserved on birchbark.<sup>41</sup> However, most of the surviving me-

38 NGB VII (112–118), VIII (212), DND (653–654). See also Janin (1981, 176–181; 1998, 240–250), Vodoff (1981, 242, 252–254, 273).

39 NGB VII (118–122), VIII (212), DND (654–656). See also Vodoff (1981, 242), Bulanin (1997, 160–161).

40 The text starts with ‘I ... write’ but then it says *prikazyvaje*, which is formally a third-person singular, viz. ‘he bequeaths’, not ‘I bequeath’.

41 Last wills of men (besides Moisej’s in N519/520): N42 (Mixel’; DND 619), N138 (Silvester; DND 533–534), N1077 (Afanas; Gippius et al. 2017, 10–11). Last wills of women (besides Marija’s in N692): N28 (Fetin’ja; DND 685), N580 (Ul’jana; DND 548, NGB XII, 251). See also the fragment N1078 (Gippius et al. 2017, 11) and N689, which seems to be an addendum to a testament (DND 573–574). All these wills are dated to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Older testaments on birchbark (twelfth century) could be N818 (DND 367–368) and Staraja Russa 37 (DND 456, NGB XII, 166), although the exact text type is not fully clear.



dieval wills were written on parchment, and the text type was closely connected with the church, one of the chief domains of parchment literacy. Wills, like other official writs and charters, were intended to have continuing validity, so they were written on parchment and archived. Therefore, though we cannot be fully certain, it is highly likely that Moisej's testament and other last wills on birchbark were not official documents, but rather rough drafts for later parchment documents or else copies made from parchment documents for personal use. This is borne out by N307 (see Section 11.4), which refers to forged wills with seals; judging from all the available evidence, such seals were only used with parchment documents (or, from the fifteenth century onwards, paper documents).

Looking back on the examples discussed in this section, we can conclude that birchbark letters were firmly integrated in legal and administrative practice. We have gained an insight into the role of documents in legal conflicts, the role of (oral) witnesses and the reflection of these testimonies in writing, as well as the practical and mundane character of many of the written messages.

## Estate Management

Many of the texts preserved from the later period of birchbark writing, especially the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, deal with the administration of feudal estates (manors) in the Novgorodian lands.<sup>1</sup> These include petitions sent by individual peasants or entire communities to their landlords in the city, sometimes hundreds of kilometers away. The petitions recount bad living conditions, conflicts, and abuses perpetrated by corrupt or unkind stewards.<sup>2</sup> A typical example of this genre is found in the following letter. The emotionally charged language reflects a situation in which the peasants feel they have been pushed beyond their limits:

A bow to Jurij and to Maksim from all the peasants. What have you (*singular*) given us for a steward? He does not stand up for us. He is selling us out, and we have been robbed by him. (Can you imagine:) And you (i.e., 'we') have to stay put and cannot get away from him. And we have been ruined by this. If he is to stay, we do not have the strength to stay. So give us a peaceable man; in that we petition you.

(N370, ca. 1360–1380)<sup>3</sup>

The next letter is some two hundred years older than N370. While N370 was written in the name of a peasant collective, Staraja Russa 10 is written from one individual to another (neither of whom are known from other sources):

This is a letter from Jarila to Onanija. In your manor there is only water to drink among the people of Gorodišče, and the people of Staraja Russa grieve on account of the people of Gorodišče. If you so will, frighten the officials so that they won't do (any more) harm.

(Staraja Russa 10, ca. 1160–1180)<sup>4</sup>

1 See Rybina (1993, 346–347) for a commentary on the geographical distribution.

2 Smith (1968) offers some English translations of birchbark documents that illustrate the history of serfdom in Russia, including N142 (Section 1.7), and N136, N311, and N370 (see below). It should be pointed out that some of his translations are outdated, because of new readings of the texts.

3 NGB VI (68–71), VIII (204–205), DND (588–590). See also Levin (1989a, 131), Gippius and Schaecken (2011, 30). Kwon (2016) proposes an alternative reading of several parts of the text.

4 NGB VII (150–151), VIII (216), DND (447–448). See also Vodoff (1981, 262).

The village of Gorodišče is located not far from Staraja Russa, where the letter was discovered.<sup>5</sup> The author, Jarila, writes to draw Onanija's attention to the dire famine on his estate. Jarila apparently blames unnamed officials and asks Onanija to 'frighten' them lest they increase the misery of the villagers.

The fact that this letter was unearthed in Staraja Russa may indicate that Jarila wrote about his worries from out of town, referring to the feelings of his fellow townsmen, while Onanija was staying in Staraja Russa and not in his manor, in Gorodišče. Other possible scenarios are that Jarila wrote the letter from Staraja Russa but never sent it to Gorodišče, for instance because it was a draft, or that the messenger returned the letter to Jarila.

The next example is a contract (or a draft of one) between a family of peasants and their landlord, who is not named:

Mysl's children, Trufan and his brothers have hereby agreed to give as grain-tribute 6 bushels of rye and a bushel of wheat (and) 3 of malt; for tribute, 3 marten-pelts and a pood of honey;<sup>6</sup> for the children, each a squirrel skin—3 (in total)—and 3 handfuls of flax. A ram at the first-fruits.

(N136, ca. 1360–1380)<sup>7</sup>

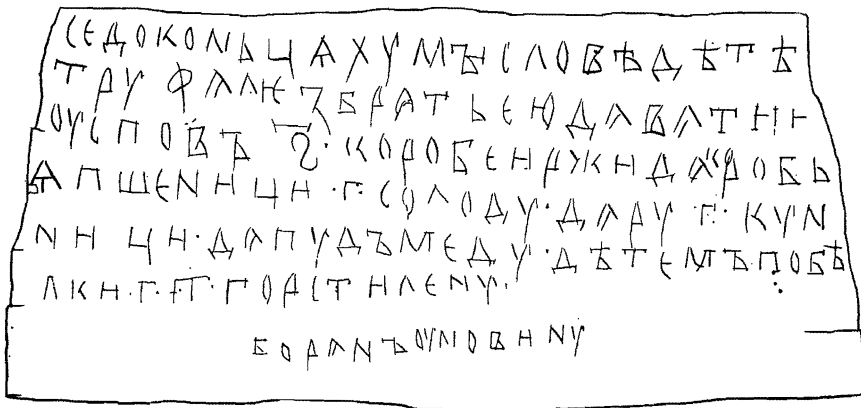


FIGURE 21 Drawing of N136 ('For the children, each a squirrel skin').

- 5 See NGB VII (151). Note that the village carries the same name as the residence of the princes of Novgorod, which is associated with the Varangian chieftain Rjurik (*Rjurikovo Gorodišče*); see above, Section 1.1.1. Derived from *gorod* 'town', Gorodišče has the approximate general meaning of 'township' or 'fortified, palisaded settlement' (Birnbbaum 1996a, 24).
- 6 For 'pood' the word *pud* is used, which is of Western origin, derived from Old Frisian *pund* (Pritsak 1998, 57–71).
- 7 NGB III (76–78), VIII (192), DND (594–595). See also Gippius (2004a, 198).

The document stipulates the rent in kind that the peasants will pay from their crops (*usop*),<sup>8</sup> the tribute that they will give the landlord in other goods (*dar*), and additional gifts that they will provide to the landlord's children; the numbers seem to indicate that the landlord had three children. The document is similar in many respects to another document from Novgorod, N406 (see Section III.4).

As can be seen in the drawing (Figure 21), the last line, consisting solely of the phrase 'A ram at the first-fruits,' is written in smaller letters, with indentations on both the left and right sides. The ram in question is part of the tribute payment. The fact that this item was singled out graphically may indicate that it was an addendum or 'codicil' made after further negotiations, perhaps in the presence of the landlord.

Five birchbark texts have been found in Tver', approximately three hundred kilometers southeast of Novgorod. The following letter is the one that was found most recently, in 1996. (For another letter from the same city, see Tver' 2, Section I.2.)

From Ilijca to Il'ja. Šujga is overwriting (the marks on) the oaks and has taken out honey from the hives, (saying:) "I am taking away the oaks on my own mark." He is cutting away the ownership-mark, (saying:) "This is my oak. Your former beekeeper has fallen into robbery." And now come here yourself; confirm your (ownership of the) bee-yard.

(Tver' 5, ca. 1300–1320)<sup>9</sup>

The author, Ilijca, is writing to his employer, Il'ja, to report a dispute over his beehives. Wild beekeeping (in forests) was economically important in medieval Russia; it was the practice to make distinctive ownership marks on honey trees (a custom that still exists in Russia and elsewhere). Ilijca was evidently Il'ja's steward or, in any case, a person of some responsibility on Il'ja's estate. He reports that another beekeeper, Šujga, is gathering Il'ja's honey, claiming Il'ja's oaks as his own, and even accusing Il'ja's previous beekeeper of being a thief. Therefore, Ilijca now asks his employer to come and personally deal with the situation.

The use of free direct speech (see also N154 and N755, Section II.3) makes the report more lively, more conversation-like, and also creates a 'moral' distance:

8 For the term *usop*, see DND (498).

9 DND (569), NGB XII (273–274). See also T.V. Roždestvenskaja (2001, 187–189), Gippius and Schaecken (2011, 14–22; note the correction in NGB XII, 274), Mendoza (2016, 129), Dekker (2018, 86).

Ilijca claims not to be responsible for what he reports, but lays all responsibility on the reader, his employer Il'ja, who can draw the conclusion for himself.

In this respect, N962 nicely illustrates the hesitation of the writer about whether or not to specify the persons who made the utterances that he quotes:

Oleksej from Zabolot'e (?)<sup>10</sup> bows down to Sofontija and Timofej. (Concerning the fact) that you have entrusted me your land, I have given out fields in your name. *The priest says:* "Show the writ, on the basis of which you have given it." *Oleksej (says):* "The elders have ordered me, and I have given it." And now the priest says thus: "You have given fields on loan, and whoever will mow those lands, I will get them, and I will tie the grass around their neck and bring them to the city." How, lords, will you now take care of me? And I bow down to you, my lords. If you, lords, will reward me, then send me, lords, a letter before St. Peter's Day, because, lords, they mow the hay on St. Peter's Day.

(N962, ca. 1430–1450)<sup>11</sup>

Halfway through the composition of the letter, which seems to have been dictated, the writer obviously decided to tag the first two parts of direct speech by adding the names ('the priest' and 'Oleksej') above the lines. The announcement of the third stretch of reported speech is already incorporated in the main text: 'And now the priest says thus'.

The following set of examples consists of petitions from peasants to landowners and lords. They often complain about conditions on the land and everyday problems, and ask their lord to take action:

To (our) lord Mixail Jur'evič: your peasants from Čerenskoe petition (you). You have given the village to Klimec Oparin but we do not want him; he's not a local person. God's will be done and yours.

(N311, ca. 1400–1410)<sup>12</sup>

The addressee of N311, Mixail Jur'evič, was a descendant of the famous Mišiniči boyar clan (see Section III.5.7). On birchbark we find, among others, his grand-

10 The edition offers two alternative explanations for the difficult reading 'from (the village) Zabolot'e', where *zabolot'e* literally means 'place behind the swamp': either 'about (the village) Zabolot'e' or 'about the pieces of land behind the swamp' (NGB XII, 70, 180).

11 NGB XII (69–73). See also Schaeken (2017a, 135), Dekker (2018, 110–111).

12 NGB V (143–145), VIII (202), DND (665), NGB XII (223, including a new transcription). See also Freydank et al. (1999, 528).

father, his father, his wife, and his sons. From the chronicles, we know that Mixail must have died between 1421 and 1423.<sup>13</sup> In total, we have eight letters on birchbark that are addressed to him.<sup>14</sup>

From other sources we know several villages in the Novgorodian lands with the name Čerenskoe, all derived from a river name with the meaning 'black'.<sup>15</sup> The villagers write to ask Mixail to reconsider 'giving' the village to an outsider—evidently leasing it or putting it under the stewardship of someone unfamiliar to the peasants. The letter closes with a petitionary formula attested in several other birchbark letters, including Pskov 6 (see Section 11.2).

The next letter also concerns a complaint about the right to a certain piece of land, but this time on a somewhat smaller scale than a whole village:

A bow to Ana from Mikifor, from Dorofej's allotment. You gave (me) a meadow in Bykovščina; Šujga is taking (that one) away, and Osipok another. There is only a little land, and they're taking (it) away. (I have) nothing to support (me), no reason to stay on. So give me that place, Bykovščina.

(N477, ca. 1360–1380)<sup>16</sup>

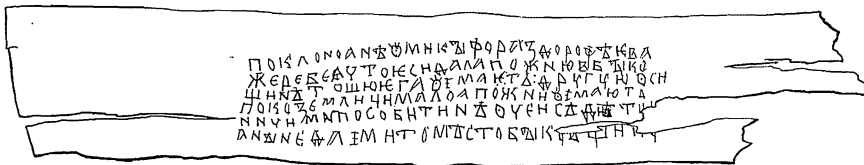


FIGURE 22 Drawing of N477 (complaint about the right to a piece of land).

In this letter, the peasant Mikifor writes to Ana, who is evidently a landowner, to complain about other men encroaching on land that he farms. He clearly wants Ana to give him some form of deed to show that he has rights to the land. The name of one of Mikifor's antagonists, Šujga, has already been encountered in another birchbark, Tver' 5 (see above). It literally means 'left-handed'.<sup>17</sup>

13 The last reference to him in the First Novgorod Chronicle occurs in the entry for the year 1420 (NPL, 413; Michell and Forbes 1914, 190).

14 DND (665–668).

15 See NGB IV (40), V (145).

16 NGB VII (71–73), VIII (210), DND (631–632), NGB XII (243).

17 See DND (71).

As can be seen in the drawing (Figure 22), the scribe did not trim the birchbark after writing the text—a departure from the usual practice (cf. N421, Section II.3).

The translation ‘a bow’ is a literal rendition of the Old Novgorodian opening formula *poklonъ* (or *poklanjanie*, which is attested in earlier birchbark letters, up to the thirteenth century). This opening was used as a respectful greeting,<sup>18</sup> it conveyed in written form the gesture that the author would have performed in a face-to-face meeting. Given the social structure, it is likely that the messengers would have bowed upon delivering the birchbark; in some cases, they may also have bowed as the authors’ proxies while ‘performing’ the letters (reading them aloud to the addressees; cf. N422, Section III.2). The modern reader can compare symbolic gestures in epistolary closing formulas, such as the English *Hugs and kisses* or Russian *Obnimaju tebjja* ‘I embrace you’.

The same opening formula occurs in the next petition:

A bow from the people of the Šižnja and from the people of Bratiloviči to lord Jakov. Come, lord, for your grain, so that it will not rot, lord. We are ruined now, lord; the grain has frozen. There is nothing to sow, lord, and also there is nothing to eat. You (and your opponents), lord, will not come to terms between yourselves, and between you we are ruined.

(N361, ca. 1380–1400)<sup>19</sup>

The two places mentioned, the river Šižnja and the village of Bratiloviči (present-day Ratilovo), are located more than two hundred kilometers north-east of Novgorod. This letter, written in the name of villagers from at least two settlements, is both a cry for help and a reproach to Jakov; the peasants blame their dire situation on his unresolved dispute with another landlord (or landlords).

Whereas in N361 grain is mentioned (*veršb*), the next letter concerns the rye harvest (*rožb*):

A bow from Karp to my lord Foma. Lord, I was at Pustoperža; I divided the rye with Oleksa and Gafanko. There is not much rye for your share, lord—two measures out of the quarter. And Pantelik has seen this himself.

(N23, ca. 1400–1410)<sup>20</sup>

18 On opening formulas on birchbark, see Worth (1984a), Zaliznjak (1987), DND (36–37), Gippius (2009a; 2012a, 245–246), Lazar (2014, 102–115).

19 NGB VI (55–57), VIII (204, 248), DND (614), NGB XII (230).

20 NGB II (24–25), VIII (183–184, 224), DND (647–648). See also Schaeken (2011b, 357–358).

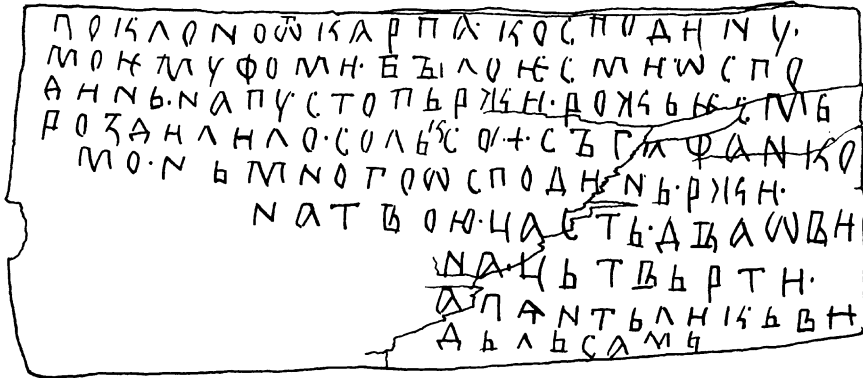


FIGURE 23 Drawing of N23 ('There is not much rye for your share, lord').

The village of Pustoperža, which no longer exists, was located about a hundred kilometers west of Novgorod, according to other medieval sources.<sup>21</sup> Karp sends his letter to tell Foma the bad news that he will receive less than expected from the rye harvest—only two 'measures' from the quarter of the crop that belongs to him.

The closing sentence of N23, 'And Pantelik has seen this himself,' occupies the last two lines (see Figure 23). Though written in the same hand, the letters here are smaller than those in the rest of the text; one gets the impression that the closing was squeezed into the limited space remaining on the lower right of the birchbark. (The lower left portion was left blank, perhaps because of roughness and holes in the birchbark.) Significantly, the language of the closing differs in some respects from that of the seven preceding lines.<sup>22</sup> All this suggests that the closing is a postscript, added after some delay or even in a separate writing event. The information that there was a witness to the crop division was evidently intended to assure Foma that the crop division was honest, despite the meager results, and that he is not being cheated by his far-off rural agents.

Our final example of correspondence from peasants to their landlords is the following:

To lord Ondrejan Mixajlovič, lord Mikita Mixajlovič, our lady Nastas'ja, Mixail's wife, the peasants of Izboišče bow down. Here, lords, in your manor Gorotnaja (?), summonses are appearing; false summonses are

21 See NGB II (25), VIII (184).

22 More specifically, the closing sentence shows Novgorodian dialectal features and is phrased in the so-called 'everyday' (*bytovoj*) orthography (see Section 1.7).



appearing here, and also, lords, false testaments are appearing here. And your Netrebuj (and) (?) the clerk copy false summonses and testaments. And they claim that Iva[n] (?) Parfe[ev] (?) has put his seal on the testaments. And your peasants bow down to you, our lords.

(N307, ca. 1420–1430)<sup>23</sup>

N307 is a petition composed on behalf of an entire village, Izboišče, located two hundred kilometers east of Novgorod. The writer is clearly inexperienced and certainly not a professional scribe; he makes numerous grammatical mistakes and garbles some of the names he mentions (Gorotnaja? Netrebuj (and) the clerk? Iva[n] Parfe[ev]?). The three addressees are members of the leading Mišiniči boyar clan (see Section III.5.7); the father of the first two recipients and the husband of the third was evidently the same Mixail to whom N311 was addressed (see above).<sup>24</sup>

The examples in this section have shown that birchbark correspondence could be maintained over larger distances, from the Novgorodian hinterland to ‘the city’. Peasants were able to use writing, and if they were not literate themselves, they could use a (more or less experienced) scribe, possibly a cleric, such as the village priest.

23 NGB V (137–140), VIII (201–202, 244–245), IX (152–153), X (97), DND (678). See also Dekker (2018, 88).

24 As Levin notes: “Addressing Nastasia as well as her grown sons, the peasants indicate that they consider her to have the authority and the ability to act on their behalf, and acknowledge her claim to the land on which they reside.” (1983, 160).

## Family Life and Household Management

Quite a few birchbark letters are devoted to family affairs. The discussion of letters about commerce or estate management concerned those strata of society whose business affairs were significant enough to warrant written communication. In other words, craftsmen who lived relatively uncomplicated lives did not usually need to maintain correspondence in order to carry out their employment. In the area of family life, this can in principle be different. The subjects we are about to encounter (everyday life, death, marriage, family quarrels) are not necessarily restricted to the life of the upper classes. Nevertheless, a number of these birchbark letters have been linked to the ruling elite. The author of the following letter (N43), Boris, is writing to ask his wife Nastas'ja to send him an assistant and a shirt. Boris is thought to be the Boris Vasil'evič who is mentioned in the chronicles; he served as the *posadnik* of Novgorod in 1416–1417 and died of the plague in 1417.<sup>1</sup>

From Boris to Nastas'ja. As soon as this letter arrives, send me a man on a stallion, because I have a lot of work here. And send a shirt; I forgot a shirt.

(N43, ca. 1380–1400)<sup>2</sup>

A birchbark fragment found at the same site as N43, N15 (ca. 1410–1420), is addressed to 'the lord Ivan Borisovič', i.e., 'Ivan, son of Boris'.<sup>3</sup> It has been suggested that this Ivan was the son of the Boris and Nastas'ja of N43.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of whether or not this is the case, N43 can definitely be connected with the next letter to be discussed:

A bow from Nastas'ja to my lords, to my brothers. My Boris is dead. How, lords, will you care for me and my children?

(N49, ca. 1410–1420)<sup>5</sup>

1 Janin (2003, 321–327).

2 NGB II (44–45), DND (651). See also Levin (1983, 162), Freydank et al. (1999, 526), Kempgen (2006), Mendoza (2002, 300; 2016, 129, 131), Dekker (2018, 6–7).

3 NGB II (15), VIII (222), IX (127), DND (652).

4 DND (652).

5 NGB II (50–52), VIII (186), IX (127), DND (651–652). See also Levin (1983, 166–167), Freydank et al. (1999, 527), Kempgen (2006).

It can be noted that N43 and N49 were found near one another in the excavation, though not on the same lot. N43 has a tragic sequel in N49, in which Nastas'ja writes to inform her brothers that Boris has died. As mentioned above, the *posadnik* Boris Vasil'evič died in 1417; this agrees entirely with the archaeological dating (ca. 1410–1420), so the birchbark can be assigned an unusually precise date.

N43 and N49 present somewhat contradictory pictures of Nastas'ja's social autonomy. On the one hand, as shown in N43, she has the power to act as her husband's agent when he is away on business. On the other hand, as shown in N49, when her husband dies, she says that she and her children (including, perhaps, the Ivan mentioned in N15) are entirely dependent on her brothers' benevolence.

N125 is less ambiguous about the autonomy of the woman author, who gives her son some clear instructions:

A bow from Marina to my son Grigorij. Buy me some good silk cloth. I gave the money to Davyd Pribyša. And you, (my) child, do (this) yourself and bring it here.

(N125, ca. 1400–1410)<sup>6</sup>

For 'good silk cloth' Marina uses the word *zěndjanica*, named after the village of Zandan near the city of Bukhara in Central Asia, a hub for traders located on the Silk Road, almost four thousand kilometers away from Novgorod. Marina was obviously in a position to give financial orders to her son without any reference to other (male) masters of the household. Moreover, she addresses her son as 'child' (*čado*), although he must have been an adult because she asks him to purchase the cloth himself; the authority of the mother of the household is unequivocal in this instruction.

The next letter testifies to a woman's feelings in an earlier stage of a relationship:

[*Fragment 1*] [...] to you three times, and this Sunday (or: week). What ill-will do you bear to me that you haven't come to me? I have treated you like a brother. Have I already wearied you, sending (you messages)? But I know that to you it is displeasing; if it were pleasing to you, you would tear yourself away from the eyes (of others) and come running [...].

6 NGB III (59–60), DND (657). See also Levin (1983, 161), Faccani (1995, 58–59, 153–158).

[*Fragment 2*] [...] now somewhere else. Reply to me about [...]. I leave you? If I have wearied you with my foolishness—if you begin to mock me, God will judge (you), and I will.

(N752, ca. 1100–1120)<sup>7</sup>



FIGURE 24  
Photograph of N752 ('Love in a Wet Climate'), as unearthed in 1993.

As shown in the photograph (Figure 24), N752 was found in two strips tied up in a loose knot—the beginning and end of a shredded letter, with the middle part missing. The opening of the first fragment is also missing, but the lacuna is too small to contain an opening formula with the names of the sender and addressee. Thus, it can be inferred that the letter was sent anonymously.

Grammatically agreeing forms show that the sender of N752 is a woman, and the receiver a man; judging from the contents, they are having a love affair. The author is evidently an educated woman, since she has a poignant style, a vivid vocabulary, and some knowledge of literary tropes. She is writing to scold her lover because he missed an assignation (or several assignations). In the last sentence, in which the author threatens the addressee with divine judgment if he is toying with her affections, she refers to herself with a bookish formula of self-abasement—*moja xudost*, 'my poorness', a loan translation from Greek (literally meaning 'cheapness'; cf., for instance, the German *meine Wenigkeit*), which is rendered simply as 'I' in the translation.

After its discovery in 1993, N752 caused a small sensation in the international press. Articles came out with amusing titles like 'From Russia without

<sup>7</sup> NGB X (46–49), DND (249–254), NGB XII (269). See also Janin (1995, 233–234), Gippius (2012a, 247–248), Faccani (2017, 179–180).

Love' (*Washington Post*) and 'Love in a Wet Climate' (*History Today*). The latter dubbed N752 'Russia's oldest love letter.'

The contents of N752 suggested a new interpretation of a letter that had been found fifteen years earlier, in 1978, on the same site:

Come to the rye-field on Saturday, or send word.

(N566, ca. 1100–1120)<sup>8</sup>

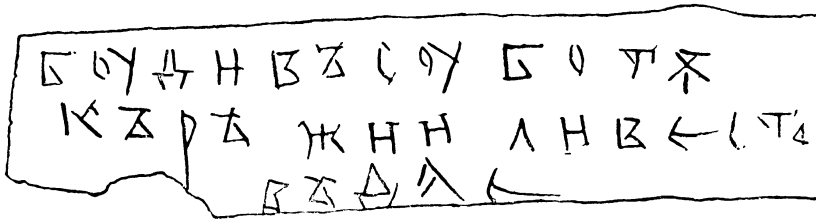


FIGURE 25 Drawing of N566 ('Come to the rye-field on Saturday').

Though only eight words long, N566 is a complete text, as can be seen from its margins (see Figure 25). If the intention were simply to set up an appointment for work in the 'rye' (a rye-field known to the correspondents), one would expect an opening formula like, for instance, 'From X to Y'. The absence of such an opening is unusual and suggests an attempt to conceal the identity of the author and addressee. This desire for secrecy may well have been because the appointment was a tryst; cf. N752 above, which also lacks an opening formula, presumably for the same reason. Though written in different handwritings, N566 and N752 come from the same period and were discovered close to one another. Since they both seem to deal with intimate meetings, it has been suggested that they may have been written in the course of one and the same affair, or even that N566 was a reply to N752.

Whereas the anonymous writer of N752 writes to her inattentive lover in highly charged, at times poetic language, the author of the following letter, Mikita, writes his marriage proposal to Malanija in an entirely unemotional, straightforward manner:

From Mikita to Malanija. Marry me. I want you, and you me. And Ignat Moiseev is witness to that. And in property [...].

(N377, ca. 1280–1300)<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> NGB VIII (34–35), DND (254). See also Faccani (2006, 12–13).

<sup>9</sup> NGB VI (73, 76–77), DND (494–495), NGB XII (232–233). See also Vodoff (1981, 269), Levin (1989b, 100–101), Schaeken (2017a, 131).

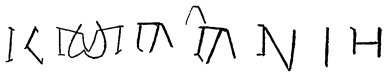


FIGURE 26 Drawing of the new reading of the addressee's name in N377.

The text is even more prosaic, more realistic, more down-to-earth than it appears. The phrase 'I want you, and you me' sounds passionate in English translation, but is actually prosaic; the verb 'want' was used formulaically in marriage proposals in medieval times (see also the use of the verb in N731 below).<sup>10</sup> The letter therefore says nothing whatever about Mikita's feelings.

The reading of the name Malanija is of a very recent date (see Figure 26). Initially, the letter's addressee was known as Ul'janica. Later on, her name was read as Ana, with the assumption of clumsy handwriting and some redundant letters and mistakes that had not been crossed out or corrected. However, renewed scrutiny (thanks to new, high-quality photographs) has resulted in the new proposal, Malanija.<sup>11</sup>

One unexpected detail of N377 is that Mikita is making his proposal directly to Malanija rather than to her parents (or household head). Judging from other medieval sources, the standard practice was for the groom's family to negotiate the marriage with the bride's parents or other senior family members; the bride herself seems not to have been consulted much. This custom is reflected in two other birchbarks—N955, discussed below, and N731, in which the author, Janka, writes ('along with Seljata', probably her husband) to another woman, Jarila, to negotiate the date and other details of a wedding ceremony:

A bow from Janka along with Seljata to Jarina. The child wants yours (i.e., what you proposed). By the (time of) the holiday he wants her. Please, hurry to come here. And I promised him my consent (so that it would be), as you said to him earlier: "When you come—that very day I will make the betrothal." And if you don't have a veil there, then buy one and send it. And where there is bread for me, there is also (bread) for you.

(N731, ca. 1160–1180)<sup>12</sup>

The next birchbark letter to be discussed is remarkable in several respects. The upper layer of the birchbark has disappeared, but it clearly contained a

<sup>10</sup> Cf. DND (393, 495).

<sup>11</sup> NGB XII (232–233).

<sup>12</sup> DND (392–394), NGB XII (269). See also Faccani (1995, 38–41, 136–140), Collins (2011, 41–43, 45, 51).

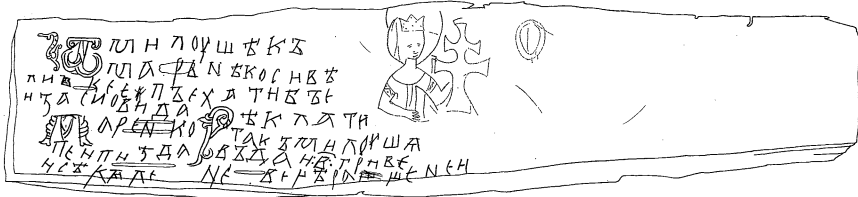


FIGURE 27 Drawing of N955 ('Marenka, let the vagina drink and the clitoris').

drawing. It has left an imprint on the lower layer that has come down to us, and is vaguely visible to the right of the text: a cross with a woman and a man on either side (see Figure 27). In relation to the text, it seems to be the depiction of a wedding ceremony.

The text itself consists of three sections, each of which begins with an ornamental initial. This is encountered more frequently on parchment and is certainly not the usual writing style on birchbark, which is generally much more straightforward.

The three parts of the text throw light on different aspects of what seems to be a wedding agreement:

[*Upper part*] From Miluša to Marena. Big Braid, may she (or: let her) marry Snovid.

[*Lower left*] Marenka, let the vagina drink and the clitoris.

[*Lower right*] Thus spoke Miluša: Give yesterday's 2 *grivnas*.

(N955, ca. 1140–1160)<sup>13</sup>

At the top, Miluša informs Marena that the wedding of Big Braid and Snovid is forthcoming. This Snovid may well be the same one as encountered in N1009 (Section 11.2) and a few other birchbark letters (see Section 11.5.5). 'Big Braid' is, in all probability, an individual nickname of an unmarried woman who, in accordance with the Russian tradition, wore her hair in one braid.

Bearing in mind that in the message on the lower right Miluša asks for money (the two *grivnas* that had been negotiated the day before), it seems evident that she is the matchmaker. The wish that she utters to Marenka in the message on the lower left, viz. that the marriage may be fruitful, indicates that the latter is the bride's mother, and identical to the addressee. Whereas Miluša addresses her by her full name (Marena) in the opening formula, in the fertility spell she uses the diminutive form (Marenka).

13 NGB XII (55–59). See also Faccani (2006, 10–12), Collins 2011 (English translation on p. 39), Schaeken (2017a, 131), Dekker (2018, 165).

From love affairs and marriage, we now turn to a form of behavior that apparently caused a scandal in Novgorod:

A letter from Žiročko and from Teško to Vdovin. Say to Šil'ce: "Why are you damaging other people's pigs? Nozdr'ka has made (this) known. And you have disgraced the entire Ljudin End. (There has been) a letter from the other side (of the river). It was about horses, that you have done the same (with them)."

(N954, ca. 1100–1120)<sup>14</sup>

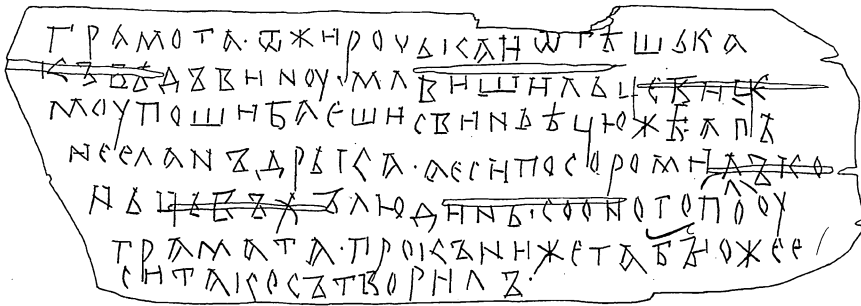


FIGURE 28 Drawing of N954 ('Why are you damaging other people's pigs?').

The text is unique because, *inter alia*, it mentions two of the regions of Novgorod: Ljudin End, to the south of the citadel on the Sophia Side of the city (the left bank of the Volxov); and 'the other side'—that is, the Trade Side, on the right bank (see Section 1.1.1). In addition, the mention of Nozdr'ka may allude to yet another region of the city; there are chronicle references to a woman by that name who lived in Nerev End, to the north of the citadel, at the time N954 was written.<sup>15</sup> If this is true, the scandal of which Šil'ce is accused is reverberating all over the city.

What is the nature of the scandal? What is Šil'ce (a popular nickname derived from *šilo* 'awl, piercer') doing to other people's pigs and allegedly also with their horses? It must be something serious to become so widely known and to be seen as a disgrace to the entire Ljudin End. The interpretation of Šil'ce's acts hinges on the meaning of the verb *pošibati*, which is translated broadly here as 'to damage', from a root meaning 'hit, push, poke'. One explanation is that Šil'ce has committed bestiality; another is that he has been

14 NGB XII (50–54). See also Faccani (2006, 8–9), Schaeken (2017a, 130–131), Dekker (2018, 112–113, 179–180), Kassian (2019 *forthc.*).

15 NGB XII (51–52).



casting spells to cause an epidemic among his enemies' cattle. As *pošibati* is used to mean 'rape' in other medieval sources, the first explanation seems the most likely.<sup>16</sup> The authors, Žiročko and Teško, are evidently officials;<sup>17</sup> the addressee, Vdovin, is probably their subordinate, whom they are deputing to take action against the loathsome acts of their neighbor Šil'ce.

In the next letter (N644), Nežka is venting her rage against her brother Zavid, who has failed to follow up on a commission she has given him—to forge three pendants (probably ornaments for a headdress) out of four golden rings worth four *zlotniks* (a weight unit equal to approximately 4.25 grams).<sup>18</sup> Nežka suspects that Zavid has not fulfilled her request out of resentment, since she owes him a piece of cloth.

+ From Nežka to Zavid. Why won't you send what I gave you to forge? I gave it to you; I didn't give it to Nežata. If I am at fault in anything, send an official! You did give me a little cloth; if that is why you won't give (back what I gave you to forge), let me know. I am not a sister to you (*plural*), if you do thus; you won't complete anything for me! So forge (the metal) into three pendants; there are 4 *zlotniks* worth in those two rings.

(N644, ca. 1100–1120)<sup>19</sup>

The siblings mentioned in N644, Nežka, Zavid and Nežata, were members of one of the oldest networks attested on birchbark (see Section III.5.2).

N9, the 'Gostjata letter', is one of the best known and most discussed birchbark letters:

+ From Gostjata to Vasil'. What (my) father gave me and (my) relatives gave, that is with him. Now, taking a new wife, he won't give me anything. Having struck hands (in a new marriage contract), he has sent me away and has taken another. Please come!

(N9, ca. 1160–1180)<sup>20</sup>

16 Cf. the examples in SRJa XI–XVII 18 (84).

17 Žiročko might be the individual with the same name who is mentioned in N1000 (see Sections II.2 and III.5.5).

18 See also N1052 and N288 (Section II.2). In N1072 (1180s–1250s) a *zlotnik* is used in a different way, as a further specification of the *grivna* (*grivna zlotnik*); see Gippius and Zaliznjak (2016, 12–15).

19 NGB IX (41–43), DND (267–268). See also Mendoza (2002, 304).

20 NGB I (16–20), VIII (182), IX (126–127), DND (300–301). See also Jakobson (1971a, 614–616), Birnbaum (1977, 234), Vodoff (1981, 248–249), Mendoza (2016, 131).

Most scholars now believe that the letter deals with a case of divorce; Gostjata's former husband has sent her away without returning her dowry. She is writing to get the help of Vasil', who was apparently a family member—probably a brother or uncle. The words translated as 'having struck hands' refer to a ritual gesture performed by two parties when making a contract—in this case, a betrothal agreement between Gostjata's ex-husband and another woman. The fact that Gostjata is writing to Vasil' for help rather late in the game, after she has lost her husband and home, suggests that she lived far away from Novgorod, in another city. The language of N9 is not in the Novgorod dialect, and the spelling is not the 'everyday' (*bytovoj*) Novgorodian system, but the supra-regional 'standard' spelling, similar to the orthography of texts from other cities; this makes it probable that the letter was not written by Gostjata herself but by a professional scribe.

The next two letters were found rolled up together; they are by the same author, Smen (with the nickname Čix), and both are written in the same handwriting:

A bow from Smen to my daughter-in-law. In case you have not celebrated the commemoration meal: you had malt, and the rye malt is in the cellar. You take a handful, and as much flour as you need, and you bake it in the (proper) measure. And the meat is in the pantry. And concerning the rouble that is due to Ignat, you give it.

(N363, ca. 1380–1400)<sup>21</sup>

A bow from Smen [C]ix (i.e., Čix) to Sidor. When you will sell, then you give us rye for a *poltina* (half a rouble), as you will give it to (other) people. And the letter to you is with my servant.

(N364, ca. 1380–1400)<sup>22</sup>

While N363 is addressed to Smen's daughter-in-law, who is living in his household, N364 is a business letter addressed to someone outside the family—Sidor, who was part of the social network surrounding Grigorij (see Section III.5.6). The Ignat mentioned at the end of N363 may also have been a prominent Novgorodian, a boyar of the Mišiniči clan.<sup>23</sup>

21 NGB VI (56, 58–59), VIII (204), DND (606–607), NGB XII (230–231). See also Levin (1983, 162–163), Dekker (2014, 10; 2018, 57), Faccani (2017, 177–178).

22 NGB VI (59–61), VIII (204), DND (606–607), NGB XII (231). See also Levin (1989a, 131), Lazar (2014, 118), Dekker (2014, 9; 2018, 56).

23 See Janin (1981, 44); see also Sections I.1.3 (where Ignat's father, Matfej Varfolomeevič Kozka, is discussed) and III.5.7 (on the network of the Mišiniči clan).

N363 provides a fascinating glimpse into domestic life. Smen is writing first of all to remind his daughter-in-law to prepare food for a posthumous commemoration (a periodic memorial to the dead); he tells her where to find the ingredients for brewing beer (malt)<sup>24</sup> and baking bread (flour) or perhaps pie with meat (*pirog*)—a dish that is still a major part of the cuisine in present-day Russia.

It is interesting that the two letters were found in a single bundle, since they were supposed to be delivered to two different households. One logical explanation is that Smen handed them together to the servant mentioned at the end of N364, who then somehow failed to deliver them.

In this section, we have already encountered some birchbark letters that relate to courtship and marriage (N377, N731, N752, and N955). The next letter contains a wedding invitation:

A bow from Oksin'ja and Onanija to Rodivon and my sister Tat'jana. Come to the city before this Sunday. I am to give my daughter (in marriage), and my sister should be an attendant. And I make a great bow to my lord Rodivon and my sister.

(Staraja Russa 40, ca. 1380–1400)<sup>25</sup>

Oksin'ja and her husband Onanija are writing to invite their family in Staraja Russa to come 'to the city'—that is, to Novgorod—for their daughter's wedding. Although the salutation includes the names of both the bride's parents, the rest of the text reflects the voice of Oksin'ja alone. Similarly, in her opening and closing formulas, Oksin'ja addresses first her brother-in-law Rodivon and then her sister Tat'jana, but in the 'business' portion of the letter—the actual invitation—she mentions Tat'jana alone, in the third person. As an aunt of the bride, Tat'jana would customarily be expected to perform an important role in the wedding (translated here in broad terms as 'attendant'). In content, Staraja Russa 40 closely resembles N497 (see Section III.3), another invitation to family members to come to 'the city'.

We now turn to N531, which is one of the longest surviving texts written on a single piece of birchbark (on both sides). Though it deals with a complicated legal episode, it is treated in this section because it is not a law text but a private letter from a sister to a brother. Its emotional tone and unceremonious language would be out of character in an actual legal document.

24 For the tentative translation of 'a handful' (*kolob'ja*) of malt (NGB VIII, 204; DND 607), see also the etymological considerations of Jakobson (1971b, 632–633).

25 NGB XII (170–172). See also Schaecken (2017a, 131), Faccani (2017, 175–176).

[*Inner side*] + From Ana, a bow to Klimjata. Brother, lord, take action in my legal conflict with Kosnjatin. Declare to him before witnesses, “When you placed a surety-bond on my sister and on her daughter, you called my sister a slut and (her) daughter a whore. Then Fed (i.e., Fedor), when he arrived and heard about that statement, drove my sister out and was near to killing her.” Then, lord brother, after conferring with Voeslav, say to him (Kosnjatin), “Since you have made that claim, prove it.” If Kosnjatin says, “She stood surety for (her) son-in-law,” you, dear brother, lord, say this to him:

[*Outer side*] “If there turn out to be witnesses against my sister”—if there turn out to be witnesses before whom I stood surety for (my) son-in-law, then I am indeed at fault. Then you, brother, having ascertained the claim that he (Kosnjatin) has made against me and the surety, if there turn out to be witnesses to that, I am no sister to you, and no wife to (my) husband; then you can kill me, never mind Fedor. My daughter gave money before witnesses, with a public declaration, and she asked for a loan. And he (Kosnjatin) summoned me to the settlement, and I came, because he had gone away speaking as follows: “I’m sending 4 officials for the silver *grivnas*.”

(N531, ca. 1200–1220)<sup>26</sup>

The text of Ana’s letter is difficult to understand due to its sometimes convoluted syntax and, in certain cases, ambiguous wording. Another complicating factor is that the writer makes numerous mistakes, which are sometimes but not always corrected. The omission of letters and entire syllables suggests that the letter was written in haste and under great stress. It therefore seems probable that Ana herself was the writer rather than some disinterested scribe. Otherwise it would be difficult to explain the sudden shift of perspective that occurs in the first line of the outer side. In formulating a statement that she wants her brother to make, Ana begins by referring to herself in the third person (“If there turn out to be witnesses against *my sister*”); however, in the course of the sentence she shifts to her own first-person perspective (‘witnesses before whom *I* stood surety ... then *I* am indeed at fault’). Here, Ana clearly lost track in the successive stretches of reported speech and suddenly slips into direct speech.

26 NGB VII (130–134), VIII (213–214), IX (176), DND (416–420), NGB XII (247–250). See also Levin (1983, 167–168; 1989b, 184), Lubotsky and Vermeer (1998), Collins (2001, 13–14), Mendoza (2002, 294, 307), Faccani (2017, 178–179, 184–186), Dekker (2018, 103–104).

Several interpretations have been advanced to explain the real-world scenario that lies behind this complicated letter. One plausible reading is that Ana and her daughter have paid a debt owed to the Kosnjatin who is so prominent in the text. The actual debtor is Ana's son-in-law—perhaps the Voeslav mentioned in the letter. Ana and her daughter have used money that belonged to her husband Fedor without asking him in advance. Enraged, Fedor has thrown Ana out of the house and has even threatened to kill her. Therefore, Ana asks her brother Klimjata (who also appears in N725, see Section 11.3) to intervene immediately—to prove that she and her daughter did not stand surety for the debt and that they only paid Kosnjatin under duress.

The following translation is an exact rendition of the peculiar way in which N46 is written and read—going column by column from top to bottom:

A O L R T T I A E D H W D H S N T E N W O E D H S  
F O W O E H S N R S O E T I A D H O E H R A T I  
(N46, ca. 1320–1340)<sup>27</sup>



FIGURE 29 Drawing of N46 (word game).

N46 is among the few birchbarks that do not have a purely utilitarian character. It is written not for business but for (rather malicious) pleasure: ‘A fool wrote this, a nerd said this, and the one who read this ...’. The text is a joke that ended by insulting the hapless reader; apparently, that reader was annoyed enough to rip out the slur at the end (on the right side). Such word games can be found in many cultures and in many centuries. However, curiously, there is another text from Novgorod written in the same manner that has a much more serious character—a graffito in the church of Zverin Monastery.<sup>28</sup> There, on one of the interior walls, we find the following small inscription (the original is rendered on the left here, the English translation on the right):

<sup>27</sup> NGB II (48), VIII (225), DND (542). See also Bulanin (1997, 160), Janin (1998, 68).

<sup>28</sup> See Janin (1998, 69).

B A E Ъ U Ъ	B E S D H M N
L Ž N M Ž	L S E T E A

This reads *blaženъ mužъ* ‘blessed (is) the man’—that is, the beginning of one of the best-known texts in medieval Russia, Psalm 1:1 (‘How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked’), which is also a line from an important hymn in the Orthodox liturgy.

In some cases, we find texts directly referring to the birchbark surface on which they were written, usually on utilitarian objects. For instance, N957 (ca. 1100–1120)<sup>29</sup> is inscribed on the bottom or lid of a birchbark basket and curses the person who might come up with the idea of messing around with ‘Voibuda’s basket’. It was not Voibuda himself who wrote the curse because at the end of the inscription it says: ‘And Ševko wrote (this).’ Apparently, the nickname Ševko refers to the weaver of the basket (cf. Modern Russian *šit’* ‘to sew’). A similar inscription is preserved on the very fragmentary birchbark N1056 (ca. 1075–1100),<sup>30</sup> which can be reconstructed as ‘Danilo’s [basket]. [And] Petrilo wove (*ši[le]*) (this).’<sup>31</sup> We find names of owners inscribed not only on baskets, but also on other types of containers (such as cylinder-shaped *tuesy*)<sup>32</sup> and fishermen’s floats made of birchbark.<sup>33</sup>

N10 is a final example of an inscription on an everyday object made of birchbark. It does not refer to the owner, but consists of the following riddle written along the rim of a cup, probably a salt cellar:

There is a city between heaven and earth, and a messenger comes to it,  
not by road; mute himself, he brings an unwritten letter.

(N10, ca. 1360–1380)<sup>34</sup>

29 NGB XII (60–62). See also Schaeken (2017a, 130).

30 NGB XII (157–158). See also Schaeken (2017a, 130, fn. 18).

31 See also N599 (ca. 1160–1180), which contains the inscription ‘Fedko’s basket’ three times on the lid of a birchbark basket (NGB VIII, 59–60; DND 210, 454).

32 Examples of inscriptions on *tuesy*: N116 (ca. 1200–1220; see NGB III, 49–50, XII, 206), which contains the personal name Oluš and a snake-like drawing; N484 (ca. 1240–1260; see NGB VII, 78), which reads *matъ* (either ‘mother’ or the first letters of the name Matfej); N918 (ca. 1320–1340; see DND 567; NGB XII, 15), saying ‘*posadnik* Oksentij’ (see Section 1.1.2, fn. 33).

33 Examples of inscriptions on floats: N127 (ca. 1400–1410; see NGB III, 62; DND 685), with the name Isak; N431 and N432 (ca. 1180–1200; see NGB VII, 37–38; DND 453), with different spellings of the name of the owner Il’ja.

34 NGB I (43), DND (617). See also Jakobson (1971a, 616–618), Bulanin (1997, 160), Levin (1997, 135), M.V. Roždestvenskaja (2003), Bjørnflaten (2006, 123–124).

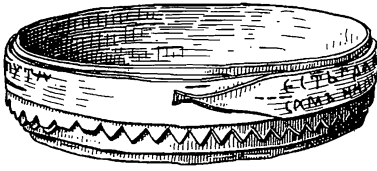


FIGURE 30

Drawing of  $\aleph\iota\omicron$  (riddle on the rim of a birchbark cup).

The riddle can be traced back to the medieval Russian apocryphal text of the 'Discourse of the Three Saints': the city is Noah's Ark, the messenger is the dove, and the unwritten letter is the olive leaf that it brings in its beak to Noah.<sup>35</sup>

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35 See Gen. 8:11: 'The dove came to him toward evening, and behold, in her beak was a freshly picked olive leaf. So Noah knew that the water was abated from the earth.'

## Learning to Read and Write

The birchbark letters in this section are mainly taken from the ‘oeuvre’ of a little boy called Onfim. Seventeen of Onfim’s birchbarks have been found so far, dating from the mid-thirteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Twelve of these contain drawings, with or without written text, and the other five a few words only. Judging from the style of his drawings and the kinds of texts he writes, he must have been six or seven years old. We have already encountered Onfim in the Preface, where N202 is depicted (see Figure 1)—a drawing with two persons. The text itself is not very clear; it may read:

To take debts from Dmitr.

(N202, ca. 1240–1260)<sup>2</sup>

On the basis of Onfim’s texts, we can gain a good idea of how children learned to read and write in thirteenth-century Novgorod—by practicing the alphabet; by spelling out syllables, i.e., writing out all the consonants plus the vowel *a*, then all the consonants plus the vowel *e*, etc.; and by reproducing well-known texts, which may have been known by heart—in particular, the Psalms. N202 may also belong to the category of familiar, ‘iconic’ texts, but now in the sense of reproducing typical business notes of adults; see also N199 below, where Onfim reproduces the standard opening formula of a letter (‘A bow from X to Y’).<sup>3</sup>

In N200, Onfim has practiced part of the alphabet and has also drawn a horseman piercing a fallen enemy with a spear. It has been suggested that this heroic figure is Onfim’s self-portrait, especially as he has written his name beside it:

[*Upper right corner, in two rows*] the letters *a* through *k* of the Cyrillic alphabet.

[Below the letters *a-k*, to the right of the horseman] Onfim

(N200, ca. 1240–1260)<sup>4</sup>

1 See Kaiser and Marker (1994, 128–130), Levin (1997, 140–141), Janin (1998, 55–70), Franklin (2002, 203), Gippius (2012a, 234–236), and also Rybina (1998), where other drawings on birchbark, wood, stone, bone, and artifacts from Novgorod are discussed.

2 NGB V (23–24), DND (476). See also Gippius (2004a, 219).

3 See Gippius (2012a, 234, 236).

4 NGB V (20–21), DND (476).



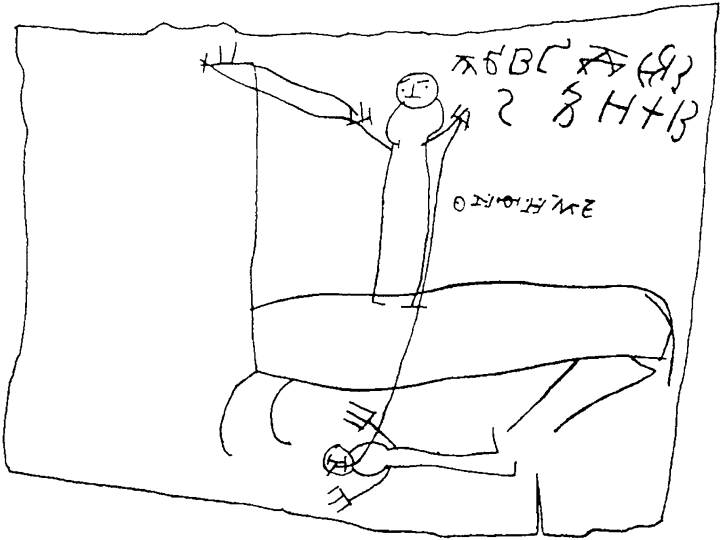


FIGURE 31 Drawing of N200 (Onfim's oeuvre).

Similarly, in N205 Onfim rehearsed the letters of the alphabet, followed by the first letters of his name. He also made a drawing, which perhaps depicts the contours of a boat with two paddles on the left.

[Top, in two rows] The letters *a* through *ja* of the Cyrillic alphabet.  
[Middle of second row] On[f]  
(N205, ca. 1240–1260)<sup>5</sup>



FIGURE 32 Drawing of N205 (Onfim's oeuvre).

N199 is an example of a recycled birchbark. It started life as the bottom of a basket; it is reinforced by two crossed strips of birchbark, and there are perforations along the edges for the leather thong that would bind it to the sides. Once the basket was worn out, its bottom was not wasted but given to Onfim as a surface for his writing practice.

5 NGB V (25–26), DND (476).

[*Inner side*] The letters of the Cyrillic alphabet and sequences of syllable exercises: *ba va ga da*, etc., *be ve ge de*, etc., *bi vi gi di*, etc.

[*Outer side, in frame*] A bow from Onfim to Danilo.

[*Outer side, below frame*] I am a beast.

(N199, ca. 1240–1260)<sup>6</sup>

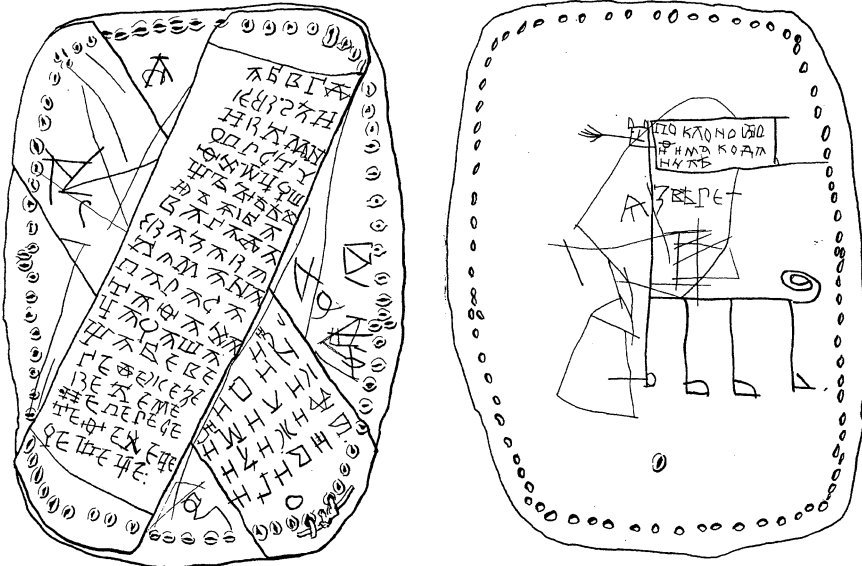


FIGURE 33 Drawing of N199 (Onfim's oeuvre).

Onfim's jotting 'I am a beast' (*ja zvěre*) very much resembles the content of N1067 (second quarter of the fourteenth century), which simply reads 'I am a puppy' (*ja ščenja*). The piece of birchbark on which these words were written contains small eyeholes; the editors suggest that a child might have attached it with a cord around the neck of his favorite puppy.<sup>7</sup>

The drawing on the outer side of N199 depicts a fantastic 'beast' with a long neck, small ears and a curly tail. Out of its mouth comes something that looks like the feathered shaft of an arrow; this may be its fiery breath or its forked tongue. Onfim's twelve drawings show that the world of his imagination was peopled largely by horses, weapons, warriors slaying enemies, and monsters. Though the writing surface and the language are different, the drawings themselves look much like the artwork of children Onfim's age today or, indeed, in any day and age.

<sup>6</sup> NGB V (17–20), IX (138), DND (476–478). See also Stamenova (2017), who offers an alternative reading of 'I am a beast', which is highly implausible for some fundamental reasons.

<sup>7</sup> See Gippius and Zaliznjak (2016, 9–10).

Onfim learned to write not only by practicing the alphabet but also by copying down short texts. N203 contains a well-attested religious formula above a messy drawing of two human figures, one standing and one on horseback:

Lord, help Your servant Onfim.

(N203, ca. 1240–1260)<sup>8</sup>



FIGURE 34 Drawing of N203 (Onfim's oeuvre).

In N207,<sup>9</sup> where there is no drawing, Onfim has copied some phrases from a Psalter, while in N331<sup>10</sup> we can identify specific excerpts made by the same boy from Psalms 6:1 and 26:3 (= 27:3 in the Hebrew numbering).

N206, another of Onfim's exercises, contains, apart from syllable exercises and drawings, a sequence of four letters. The sequence might be read as a number (in this case 1263), which many scholars have taken to denote a year. In principle, this is plausible because it accords with the approximate date of this birchbark (ca. 1240–1260). A new and more convincing interpretation explains the sequence of four letters as an abbreviation, which refers to the first words of the six-o'clock *troparion* (a short hymn sung in Orthodox church services): 'Who on the sixth day and hour'.<sup>11</sup> This text must have been well-known to Onfim, who used it to practice his writing skills.

Who on the 6th (day and) hour (...). *ba va g|ga da ža za ka a ra sa ka ra.*

(N206, ca. 1240–1260)<sup>12</sup>

8 NGB V (24–25), DND (476, 478). See also Kempgen (2008), with an alternative view on the drawing, i.e., Adam, Eve, and the serpent.

9 NGB V (28), VIII (235), X (92), DND (476).

10 NGB VI (18–20), X (100–101), DND (476–477). See also Gippius (2004a, 219).

11 See NGB XII (212).

12 NGB V (26–28), X (91–92), DND (476), NGB XII (212). The meaning of the word that follows after the abbreviation, viz. *naso*, is still inconclusive: it may allude to the continuation of the six-o'clock *troparion*, as suggested in NGB XII (212), but also to the beginning of the

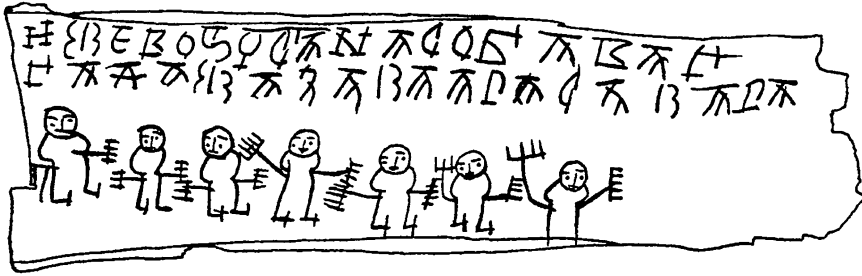


FIGURE 35 Drawing of N206 (Onfim's oeuvre).

Incidentally, there are other *troparia* attested on birchbark, including N977 (ca. 1180–1200), which contains the first words of each tone (*glas*).<sup>13</sup> This document, written by a certain Jakim (see Section III.5.5), must have served as a mnemonic aid for a priest or a choirman who had to learn the text of this *troparion* by heart.

Another example on birchbark in this section on learning to read and write is a letter that was sent about a century after Onfim's writing exercises:

[...] Buy yourself butter (?), and (buy) clothes for the children [...]. Let (them) study writing, and the horses [...].

(N687, ca. 1360–1380)<sup>14</sup>

The sender of this fragmentary message is probably a husband writing to his wife from out of town. He instructs his addressee to perform several everyday tasks: buying butter (*vologa*, which actually might be any fat or dairy product), obtaining clothing for the children, and, apparently, attending to the horses. Among these mundane tasks is having the children learn to write. Evidently, this was a routine request in the period when the letter was written; if it were unusual, we would expect him to go into more detail or perhaps even send a separate letter. The addressee clearly knew what to do, and it was normal for the children of this family to have some form of literacy education.

Apart from the alphabet exercises of Onfim, there are other examples of this kind on birchbark. The oldest one dates from the earliest period of birchbark literacy, N591 (ca. 1030): *a b v g d*, etc.<sup>15</sup> Practicing the alphabet and writing

nine-o'clock *troparion*. Even the tiny fragment N208 (...|*gvoz*... ...|*xy n*...), which is also attributed to Onfim (NGB V, 29; DND 476–477), might belong to the same set of hymns. See Schaeken (2017a, 132), and also Faccani (2017, 176–177).

13 NGB XII (85).

14 NGB IX (71–72), DND (577). See also Janin (1995, 227; 1998, 70).

15 NGB VIII (52–56), DND (275). See also Zaliznjak (1999; 2003b, 26–29), Gippius (2012a, 234, including a photograph of 'the oldest Russian alphabet').

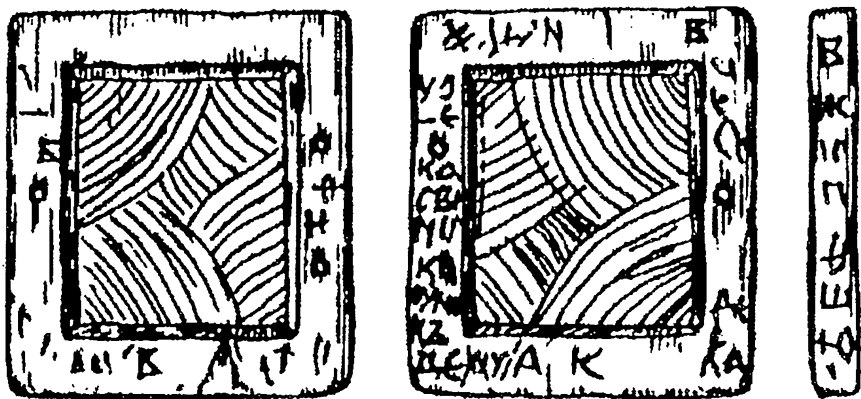


FIGURE 36 Wax tablet with letters on the edges.  
Note: After Rybina (2007, 339).

А	Б	В	Г	Д
Е	Ж	З	И	Й
К	Л	М	Н	О
П	Р	С	Т	У
Ф	Х	Ц	Ч	Ш
Щ	Ю	(Ѱ)	Ъ	(Ѣ)
Ѥ		(Ѧ)	(ѧ)	Ѧ

FIGURE 37  
Alphabet arrangement on wax tablet.

down religious texts was not only done on birchbark but also on wooden wax tablets, of which a dozen or so have been found in Novgorod.<sup>16</sup> An interesting example has come down to us from the twelfth century. It has a wooden frame into which individual letters have been carved (Figure 36).<sup>17</sup> One of the edges has the apparently random sequence of Cyrillic letters that stand for Б, Ж, К, П, Ф, Ш, and Ю (read from top to bottom).

However, if we compare this sequence with the rows of letters that Onfim wrote on the inner side of N199 (see Figure 33), the order on the wax tablet corresponds largely to the second column of N199. This means that the wax tablet must have belonged to a so-called polyptych, consisting of five tablets. If these five parts were put together alongside each other, the alphabet must have been arranged in the order that is illustrated in Figure 37.

16 See Rybina (1994), Zaliznjak and Janin (2001, 4–5).  
17 Janin (1998, 69–70), Zaliznjak (1999, 555), Rybina (2007, 338–340).



FIGURE 38 Photograph of the Novgorod Psalter.

Note: The photograph shown here has been published on several occasions; see, for instance, Zaliznjak and Janin (2001, 12) or the dust jacket of Franklin's monograph (2002).

The most well-known wooden wax tablet is the so-called Novgorod Psalter (Figure 38), which dates to the very beginning of the eleventh century. The Psalter (also known as the 'Novgorod Codex') was found in the year 2000 and consists of a set of three wooden tablets, which would have been put together with cords, so that it was more or less a booklet. The middle of the three tablets could be inscribed on both sides, whereas the two others only had one side

covered with wax. On the four 'pages' many texts have been written in a calligraphic hand and crossed out again. On the upper layer we read Psalms 75, 76, and 67:4–6 (= 76, 77, and 68:4–6 in the Hebrew numbering).<sup>18</sup>

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18 See Zaliznjak and Janin (2001), Zaliznjak (2002b; 2003a; 2003b, 3–26; 2004), Franklin (2002, 46–47), Sobolev (2003), A.A. Alekseev (2004), Bobrik (2004; 2011), Tolstaja (2004), T.V. Roždestvenskaja (2008b), Zaliznjak et al. (2009), Gippius (2012a, 230–231).

## Church, Religion, and Folk Belief

Texts about the religious life of the church and written purely in the Church Slavonic register occupy a relatively minor position in the birchbark corpus (less than five percent; see Section 1.7). As a rule, birchbark was not used for biblical and liturgical texts that were meant to be used repeatedly in church services. Such ‘public’ texts had to be durable, so they were written on parchment. However, just like lay people, monks and priests in medieval Novgorod could use birchbark for their everyday communications—for instance, drafts and personal letters and memoranda. A first example is N605, which was written by a monk and sent to one of his brethren. This is obvious not only from its contents but also from its language, which mixes the local vernacular with the Church Slavonic of religious books:

A bow from Efrem to my brother Isuxija. Without having asked, you became angry. The abbot didn’t give me leave, and I did ask, but he sent (me) with Asaf to the *posadnik* on account of the honey, and we both (only) arrived when the bells were ringing. Why are you angry? I’m always with you. It is a shame to me that you spoke with malice to me. And (nonetheless) I bow to you, my dear brother, even though you say such a thing. You are mine, and I am yours.

(N605, ca. 1100–1120)<sup>1</sup>

Efrem<sup>2</sup> reproaches Isuxija for being angry and assures him that he could not help missing their meeting. As an aside, the translation given for the last clauses at the end is only one of several possible readings; the linguistic structure permits different interpretations.<sup>3</sup>

While the sender and addressee in N605 are two monks, in the next letter they are two nuns. This can be seen from their names, from the mention of

1 NGB VIII (68–70, 215), IX (177–178), X (115–116), DND (271–272), NGB XII (252). See also Freydank et al. (1999, 520).

2 On a tentative identification of this Efrem, see Section 1.6.

3 An alternative translation of the ending (NGB VIII, 70) runs as follows: ‘It is a shame to me that you said with malice to me, “And I bow to you, my dear brother.” Say this instead: “You are mine, and I am yours.”’ The main difference is that this interpretation infers the presence of free direct speech (cf. Tver’ 5, Section 11.4).



a wimple (nun's veil), and from the closing formula 'And I salute you,' which originated in the religious milieu.

+ A bow from Xaritanija to Sof'ja. Concerning the 3 *rezanas* I sent to Mixal for the wimple, he should give (it to me). I also beseech you, my lady: he should give some salted (fish) and (fresh) fish soon. And I salute you.

(N682, ca. 1160–1180)<sup>4</sup>

N682 was found in the Trinity Excavation in Ljudin End (see Figure 2). One of the old streets that crossed this borough was the *Černicyna*—that is, 'Nun's Street', named after the nearby Convent of St. Barbara. In addition to N682, several excerpts from liturgical birchbark texts and letters from the twelfth century can be connected with this monastery, including the next one:<sup>5</sup>

A bow from the abbess to Ofrosenija. Send the habit and wimples. If (you have) a lot of wimples, send up to five wimples. I am extremely busy with the nuns; they have to be tonsured soon. Therefore, do find out if Mafej is at the monastery.

(N717, ca. 1160–1180)<sup>6</sup>

The meaning of the word translated as 'habit' (*privitka*) is not entirely clear; judging from its etymology ('wind toward'), it may have indicated a different kind of monastic garment—something wound or laced around the head or body. This birchbark letter provides the only attestation of this word in Old East Slavic.

The chronicles name four abbesses who served in the convent around the time when N717 was written—Ana, Marem'jana, Xristina, and Varvara (Barbara).<sup>7</sup> One of them must have been the sender of this letter. A possible explanation for the abbess's question about Mafej is that he was the priest who was supposed to consecrate ('tonsure') her novices.

4 NGB IX (66–68), DND (394–396). See also Gippius (2012a, 246–247), Lazar (2014, 119–120).

5 See also N657 (ca. 1180–1200), a letter from Pelaga to Ofim'ja, in which the monastery is mentioned explicitly (DND 397–398; NGB XII, 32), and N727 (ca. 1180–1200), which is an excerpt of the Easter service (DND 463–464); cf. Gippius (2012a, 239). Note that Domačko and Žirolav, who figure in N657, might be the same persons as Domaško in N926 and Žiročko in N1000 (Section 11.2), respectively; cf. Schaeken (2017a, 144–145) and Section 11.5.5.

6 NGB X (15–16), DND (396–397).

7 First Novgorod Chronicle, in the entries for the years 1167 and 1195 (NPL, 33, 42; Michell and Forbes 1914, 26, 38).

We already discussed a last will (N519/520) in Section 11.3 (*Law and Administration*); the following letter from the early fifteenth century is treated here because it is evidently the testament of a nun. This can be seen from, *inter alia*, the fact that it was discovered near the same Convent of St. Barbara.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, I, [the servant of God] Marija, departing this life, write a testa[ment during] my lifetime. I bequeath my estate to [...] my Maksim because I am childless. Let him use [that] to hold commemoration services for me.

(N692, ca. 1400–1410)<sup>8</sup>

As the testator states, Marija is childless, and she clearly has very little property to leave, as she does not bother to list it in detail; her only concern is that her legacy be used to pay for her posthumous commemoration. It therefore seems plausible that the lacuna at the end of the third line ('I bequeath my estate to [...]') contained one of the words for 'priest'.

Church affairs can also be connected to business, as is evidenced by the following letter:

A bow from the priest to Grečin. Paint for me two six-winged angels on two small icons above the Intercession. And I salute you. God (will be the guarantor) for the reward, or else we two can come to terms.

(N549, 1180–1200)<sup>9</sup>

The Intercession (*Deisis*) mentioned by the author is the central icon or group of icons on the Iconostasis, the wall that separates the sanctuary of an Orthodox church from the nave. The Intercession depicts Christ in Majesty (seated on his throne), with the Virgin Mary on His right and John the Baptist on His left, supplicating Him on behalf of sinners.

The addressee, Olisej Grečin, has already been encountered in N502 (see Section 11.3) as a court official; here he is acting as an icon painter—a role in which he is also mentioned in the 1196 entry in the First Novgorod Chronicle: "In the same year, archbishop Martyrus had the Church of the Holy Mother of God at the gates painted (with frescoes), and the painter was Grečin Petrovič" (i.e., 'Grečin, the son of Peter').<sup>10</sup>

8 NGB IX (78–79), DND (661–662). See also Dekker (2018, 150–151).

9 NGB VIII (20–22), DND (406–407). See also Vodoff (1981, 276–277), Gippius (2012a, 239).

10 Cf. NPL (42). Michell and Forbes (1914, 39) give a slightly different translation.

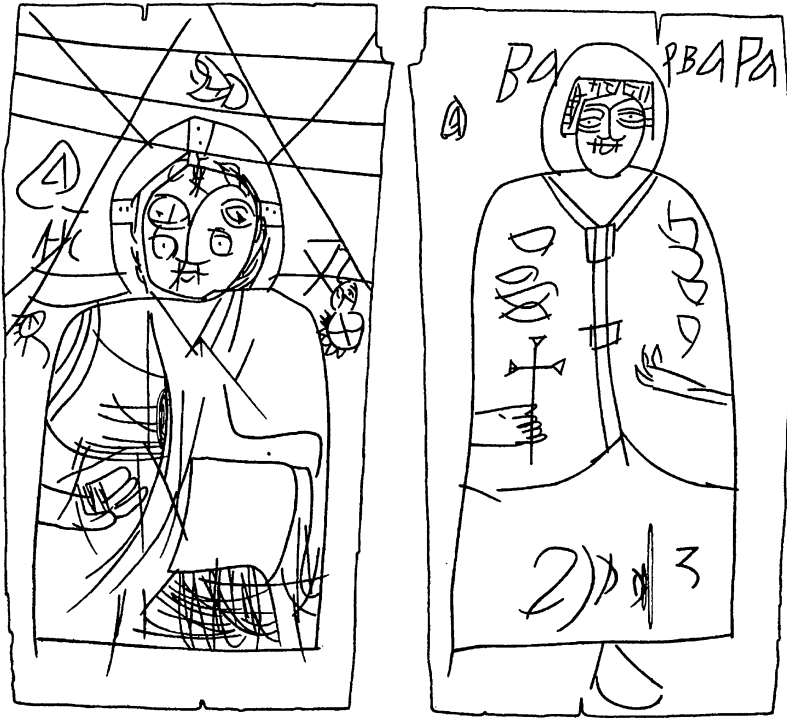


FIGURE 39 Drawings of N915-I (imitation of church icon).

N549 is not the only intersection between icon painting and writing on birchbark. One of the oldest known birchbarks, N915-I (ca. 1030),<sup>11</sup> has primitive drawings of St. Barbara on one side and the Savior on the other (Figure 39); each sketch is accompanied by a short inscription (@ *varvara* ‘the holy Barbara’ and @ *i[su]s x[risto]s* ‘the holy Jesus Christ’, respectively).<sup>12</sup> Though obviously an imitation of church icons, N915-I was clearly created for private purposes; it may have been made as a kind of personal talisman.

N419 is the only surviving birchbark text that is formatted as a book.<sup>13</sup> It is made from three pieces of bark folded in half; there are small perforations along the fold for the stitching that would have bound the book together (now lost). The resulting booklet consists of twelve pages (four per piece of

11 NGB XI (108–109), DND (276). See also Gippius (2012a, 231–233; with photographs of both sides).

12 The @ sign represents a ligature of *o* and *a*, thus rendering the Greek phrase *ho hagios* ‘the holy’.

13 Note that the left side of the birchbark on which N930 is written shows traces of stitching and appears to be the upper half of a sheet that was torn out of a birchbark book (DND 694; NGB XII, 24); see further below.

birchbark), though only seven actually contain writing; the outer piece of birchbark was left blank to serve as a cover and endpapers. The pages are tiny—approximately 4.7 cm high and 5 cm wide; the entire book fits easily into the palm of a hand.

The text begins on the third page, i.e., the front right quarter of the second piece of birchbark; it consists of two well-known prayers from the evening service:

[*Page 1*] To Jesus Christ, as we rest with God. O Lord, bless (us), Father. Receive our evening prayers, Holy Lord, and give

[*Page 2*] us remission of (our) sins, for You alone are the One who has revealed resurrection in the world.

[*Page 3*] Encircle Zion, o people, and take hold of it, and give glory in it to the One who has risen from the dead; for He is

[*Page 4*] our God, who has saved us from our transgressions. Come, people, let us sing and worship

[*Page 5*] Christ, glorifying His Holy resurrection, for He is our God, who saves us from our transgressions.

[*Page 6*] By Your sufferings we have been freed from sufferings, and by Your resurrection

[*Page 7*] we have been saved from corruption. O Lord, glory to You.

(N419, ca. 1280–1300)<sup>14</sup>

In imitation of some manuscript source, the writer heads the text on page 1 with an ornamental band of intertwined ribbons and uses illuminated initial letters (most notably the capital S at the beginning of page 6). Judging from the large number of mistakes and the unevenness of the handwriting, the writer was not a trained scribe; it has been suggested that he was a choir singer who copied the prayers for his own reference.

The next piece of birchbark contains a spell against fever; it was evidently used as an amulet or talisman:

Thrice-nine angels, thrice-nine archangels, rid the servant of God Mixej of fever by the prayers of the Holy Mother of God.

(N715, ca. 1220–1240)<sup>15</sup>

14 NGB VII (25–27), VIII (206), IX (164), DND (523–524). See also Vodoff (1981, 242), T.V. Roždestvenskaja (2008a, 100–101).

15 NGB X (14–15), DND (522). See also Bulanin (1997, 161), Franklin (2002, 270), Žolobov (2005), Gippius (2005a, 140), Ryan (2006, 39, fn. 16), T.V. Roždestvenskaja (2008a, 98–99).

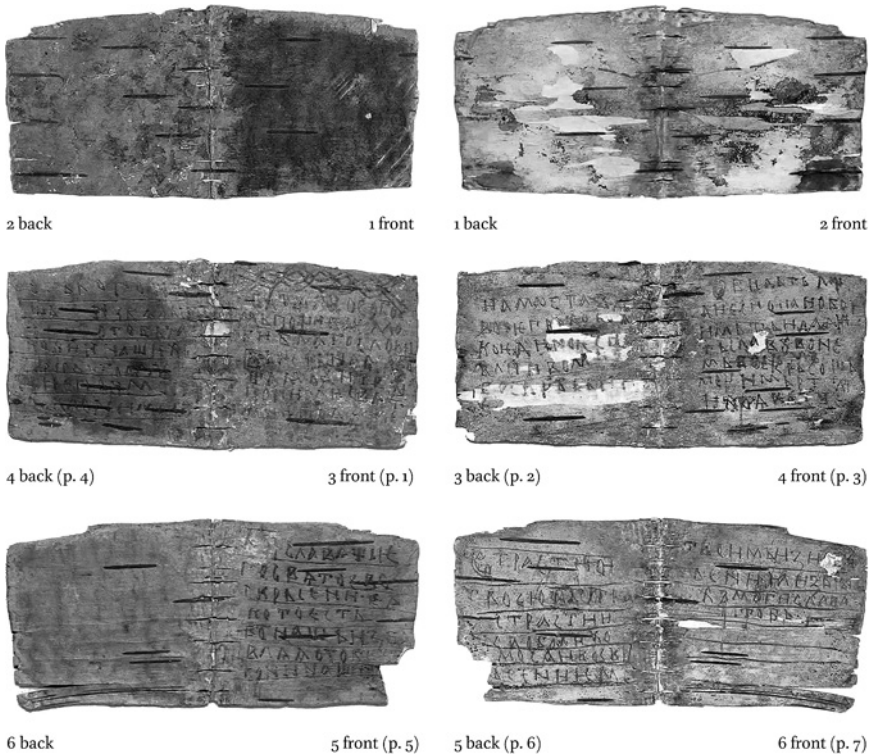


FIGURE 40 Photographs of N419 (birchbark booklet).

N734 is clearly also a spell:

Sixael, Sixael, Sixael  
 Angel, angel, angel  
 of the Lord, thrice (?) the name (?) of the angel.

(N734, ca. 1140–1160)<sup>16</sup>

In medieval apocrypha, the archangel Sixael (or Saxiel) was considered an enemy of the demons that caused fevers. The reading of the third line is not entirely certain. To the left of the text is a drawing of an Orthodox (eight-pointed) cross, flanked by the Greek formula 'Jesus Christ conquers'.

A second fever spell with Sixael's name on it was found in 2012:

<sup>16</sup> NGB X (33), DND (347–348). See also Bulanin (1997, 161), Franklin (2002, 270), Ryan (2006, 39, fn. 16), T.V. Roždestvenskaja (2008a, 94).

+ Christ is risen, He has defeated death by His death. Angel Sixael, angel Sixael, angel Sixael. The Lord chases you away, evil disease, fever!  
(N1022, ca. 1160–1180)<sup>17</sup>

There is a third instance on birchbark where Sixael appears, N930 (ca. 1400–1410),<sup>18</sup> which is a fragment of the legend of St. Sisinnius, a well-known story in medieval Slavic folklore. In the version on birchbark, Sisinnius (*Sisinit*), who is the exorciser of ‘shaking fevers’ (*trjasavicy*) personified as evil women, is sitting along with Sixael on the mountains of Sinai watching the sea: ‘(...) Then the sea rose in waves and out of it emerged seven women with unbounded hair—a cursed vision (...).’

Whereas the story of N930 is attested in various Old Slavic sources and widespread in ancient cultures,<sup>19</sup> the following testimony on birchbark of what also seems to be a spell is quite remarkable:

Gehenna’s Fire.

(N973, ca. 1240–1260)<sup>20</sup>

The expression is spelled as a single word (*geonegone*) and not as two separate words (*geonʹ ogonʹ*) like in other Old Slavic sources.<sup>21</sup> The unusual writing may have conveyed even more magical power to the curse on the enemy who will be in danger of hell fire.

The following birchbark contains an excerpt from Psalm 54:4 (= 55:3 in the Hebrew numbering):

[...] from the voice of the enemy and from the oppression of the sinful one.

(N674, ca. 1180–1200)<sup>22</sup>

The text is not particularly interesting in itself; what is interesting is that it is composed in mirror writing, like a da Vinci notebook. If the translation were

<sup>17</sup> NGB XII (119–120).

<sup>18</sup> DND (694), NGB XII (24–26). See also Gippius (2005a), T.V. Roždestvenskaja (2008a, 104–105).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Ryan (1999, 244–252; 2006).

<sup>20</sup> NGB XII (82–83).

<sup>21</sup> Cf., e.g., Mt 5:22: ‘... but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.’ In one of the oldest Slavic texts, the Old Church Slavonic Codex Zographensis, ‘hell fire’ is translated in this verse as *geona ognʹnaja* (SJS 8, 1964, 394).

<sup>22</sup> NGB IX (61–62), DND (462–463). See also T.V. Roždestvenskaja (2008a, 97–98).

printed in such a fashion, without word divisions, it would look like the following:

*noisserppoehtmorfdnaymeneehtfoeciovehtmorf  
enolufnisehtfo*

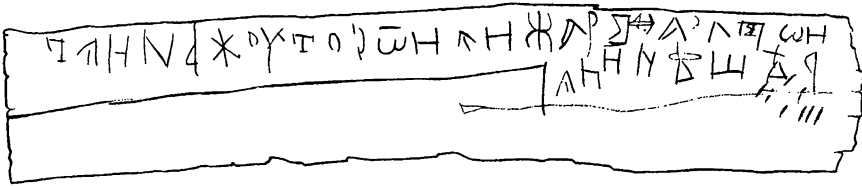


FIGURE 41 Drawing of N674 (mirror writing).

We have already seen a birchbark meant to be read in a zigzag manner (N46, Section II.5), though that was clearly just a visual game. By contrast, N674, with its mirror-reversed Psalm text, was probably intended not as a game but as a spell to ward off evil. Written on a very thin piece of birchbark, it was found tightly rolled; it has been surmised that it had once been inserted into a narrow tube. The practice of rolling Psalm texts into amulets is known from later Russian folk culture. In medieval Russia, religious texts were sometimes written in mirror reversal, apparently to give them additional magical strength.<sup>23</sup>

Here we have once again a more prosaic letter concerning a cleric:

An order from the priest's wife to the priest. What happened to you came to (the ears of) Onanija, and now it is being spread by Kjur'jak. So now show some concern about it.

(N538, ca. 1380–1400)<sup>24</sup>

The back-story to N538 is that the priest has done or been involved in something discreditable. His wife is writing to tell him that he is the subject of gossip; she wants him to take immediate action of some kind. Her tone is urgent, as shown by the word 'order' (*prikaz*) in the opening formula. Because the matter is compromising, the priest's wife wants to keep it under wraps, so she does

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Bulanin (1997, 162), Franklin (2002, 70, 247, 270–274). There might be a second mirror-reversed text on birchbark, viz. N680 (ca. 1120–1140), consisting of only a few letters. According to the edition (NGB IX, 65–66), they are merely a bad imitation of an inscription. Alternatively, the letters can be read from right to left, which might allow the reconstruction of a derivative of a personal name Ljav'ja (see Schaeken 1995).

<sup>24</sup> NGB VII (139–140), DND (628). See also Vodoff (1981, 270), Mendoza (2002, 306; 2016, 130), Levin (2015, 268–269).

not go into the specifics of the gossip. She probably wrote the letter herself; although she remains rather vague in her letter, her evident desire for secrecy makes it unlikely that she would have entrusted the writing to someone else.

The final letter to be discussed in this section is a petition to the archbishop, which has survived in three fragments; together they represent almost all of the original letter:

To the lord archbishop of Novgorod, holy archbishop Semen, your peasants from the Holy Mother of God district, the Oševo settlement, the people of Ržev, all bow to you, from young to old, lord. We have sent, lord, Deacon Oleksadr, because (his) father and his grandfather sang at the Holy Mother of God (Church) in Oševo. May you, lord, ordain that deacon as priest of the Holy Mother of God. And with him we have sent Trufan from the settlement because the church is without services. And another (thing), lord holy archbishop: the altar in the church of [...]. What command will you give about that, lord? [...] [Consecrate] the altar, lord.  
(Ng63, ca. 1416–1421)<sup>25</sup>

The birchbark can be dated to a narrow time frame because, as reported in other sources, archbishop Semen (Simeon) was in office between 1416 and 1421.<sup>26</sup> The peasants are writing from what is now the village of Aševo, about two hundred kilometers southwest of Novgorod, in the vicinity of Pskov.

It is clear why the peasants are petitioning: their church has no priest and they feel that the right candidate for the office is one of their own number, the deacon Oleksadr. They have sent him along with Trufan to Novgorod in hopes that Semen will consecrate him. At the end of the petition, the peasants make another request: something is wrong with the altar in their church; they want Semen to resolve the problem and to have the altar consecrated (again).

25 NGB XII (72–75).

26 Janin (2009a, 433), Schaeken (2017a, 128, 130).



## Witnesses to History

So far, we have seen birchbark letters that deal with relatively small-scale business, legal, household and other everyday matters. In this section, our attention will be devoted to private birchbark letters that can be linked with larger historical events known from chronicles and other public texts written on parchment. In most cases, this concerns events of a less friendly nature; we will read about wars and conflicts, both between medieval Russian tribes and against non-Slavic neighboring peoples. In the first letter, however, a peace treaty is mentioned:

[From] Grigorij to Dmitr. [We are well.] Make your rounds, don't be afraid; they have made peace on the old border of Prince Jurij. And they have sent [me] to Karelia to the Kajan Sea. (Can you imagine:) You (i.e., 'I') shouldn't hinder, shouldn't do harm to the Kajan people, and shouldn't make a bad name for yourself! If you have collected last year's tribute, take mine also. And if you hear I am not going to No[ja], then you go. And at home all is well. Send me some news. If you can, help me out with something.

(N286, 1351 or shortly after)<sup>1</sup>

The 'peace on the old border with Prince Jurij' to which Grigorij alludes is the renewal of the Treaty of Nöteborg (also known as the Treaty of Orešek), which had established the frontier between Novgorod and its enemy Sweden in 1323. The treaty was renewed several times but in view of the dating of N286 and the other letters and notes (including N403; see Section 11.9) that were written by the same person Grigorij (see Section 111.5.6), it is most likely that we are dealing with the renewal in the year 1351. The border set by the treaty split the Isthmus of Karelia (between the Gulf of Finland and Lake Ladoga, near present-day St. Petersburg) into Swedish (western) and Novgorodian (eastern) sectors; then it ran north-northwest through present-day Finland to the Gulf of Bothnia, the northernmost arm of the Baltic Sea.

1 NGB V (112–114), VIII (200, 242), IX (151), DND (595–596), NGB XII (220–221, 269). See also Holthoer (1981, 162–163), Gippius and Schaeken (2011, 22–30), Dekker (2014, 8–9; 2018, 55–56).

From Grigorij's correspondence we know that he, together with Dmitr, who was probably his brother, worked as tax collectors in the northwestern hinterlands of Novgorod. In N286, Grigorij urges Dmitr to take up the work he had been assigned in southern Karelia, which, he says, is now safe again due to the peace treaty. Grigorij himself has been sent further to the north, to the Kajan Sea (the upper part of the Gulf of Bothnia). He is indignant about this assignment, which he obviously did not anticipate,<sup>2</sup> and writes to Dmitr to ensure that his ordinary tasks will get done.

We have already encountered some petitions from peasants to their landlords (see Section 11.4); they were usually related to internal problems. The reason for the following petition, however, is the hostile behavior of the Swedes:

The Karelians of the settlements of Kjulolakša and Kir'jaž petition Lord Novgorod. We have received ill treatment from the German (i.e., Swedish) side (of Karelia). The land we have inherited from our fathers and grandfathers has been taken away by the Viimola lords (*Vymol'cy*); and they have taken the gyrfalcon hunting-grounds [...] Lapps, and robbed the fisheries. And we ourselves [...].

(N248, ca. 1380–1400)<sup>3</sup>

The Karelian settlements mentioned in this letter, which is only partially preserved, were located on the western side of Lake Ladoga, in the volatile territory near the border with Sweden (see N286, above). The phrase 'the German side' should be understood in a broader sense; in Old East Slavic, the term *German* (*němьcb*, literally, 'one who cannot speak [an understandable language]')<sup>4</sup> was often used in a generalized way to mean 'person from the Catholic West'.

The events mentioned in the birchbark seem to be related to the hostilities recounted in the First Novgorod Chronicle under the year 1396: 'In the same year, the Germans (*němci*) came to the Karelian land and ravaged two settlements: the Kjur'esky and the Kjulolasky, and burned the church.'<sup>5</sup> However, we

2 Grigorij describes what his superiors have said to him in imperatives with a so-called necessitive meaning, conveying an air of indignation (rendered in the translation as 'Can you imagine!'). The necessitive use of the imperative can also be found in N370 (Section 11.4: 'And you (i.e., 'we') have to stay put and cannot get away from him'; see DND 589 and Fortuin 2008, 11, fn. 8) and is still around in Modern Russian (cf. Gippius and Schaeken 2011, 29–30; Fortuin 2000, 56, 111, 121).

3 NGB V (70, 72–73), VIII (197–198), IX (149), DND (622–623). See also Holthoer (1981, 165), Saarikivi (2007, 208, 210, 217–218, fn. 10).

4 Fasmer (1987 III, 62).

5 NPL (387), Michell and Forbes (1914, 167).

cannot know for certain that N248 and the chronicle entry refer to exactly the same conflict; the letter only mentions 'the German (i.e., Swedish) side', which does not necessarily imply that ethnic Swedes were involved. The only aggressors named directly in the letter are the Viimola, a prominent Karelian tribe that dominated a wide territory near the border with Novgorod.

Another instance of an armed encounter, probably with the Swedes, is mentioned in the next letter:

From Savlij to Maksim. Send a horse as soon as possible. Why have you ruined me? For the second time, the army has struck at Kopor'ja. And I, lacking a second horse, threw away (some of my) possessions and lost others. So now send [...]. If there is an emergency, on a single horse not at home [...], nor firewood, nor anything on which to send to mother [...] and with me [...].

(N272, ca. 1360–1380)<sup>6</sup>

The addressee of this birchbark letter, which is missing a large piece on its lower right side, is Maksim Onciforovič, a member of the famous Mišiniči clan (see Section III.5.7). Kopor'ja was a Novgorodian fortress, which is still standing and now called Kopor'e; it was strategically located on a cliff near the Gulf of Finland. In the 1370s, around the time N272 was written, Kopor'ja was the scene of several battles in the long-standing military conflict between Novgorod and Sweden.<sup>7</sup>

N272 probably refers to these battles. However, it is not entirely clear whether the conflict was Savlij's primary concern, or whether he wrote the birchbark letter while performing some military duty. After all, he complains about his personal circumstances, which will be dire if he does not procure a second horse. He emphasizes that, if Maksim does not send him the horse, he will not be able to do anything at home; he will not be able to supply any firewood, nor will he be able to send anything to his mother any more. All this implies that Savlij had some close personal relationship with his addressee, which allowed him to demand that Maksim do something to remedy his precarious situation.

In N248 (see above), we encountered a late fourteenth-century petition from the inhabitants of two Karelian settlements. Three centuries earlier, the Karelians were already in a volatile environment:

<sup>6</sup> NGB V (97–99), VIII (199), DND (587–588).

<sup>7</sup> See Janin (1998, 146–147).

The Lithuanians have attacked the Karelians.

(N590, ca. 1075–1100)<sup>8</sup>

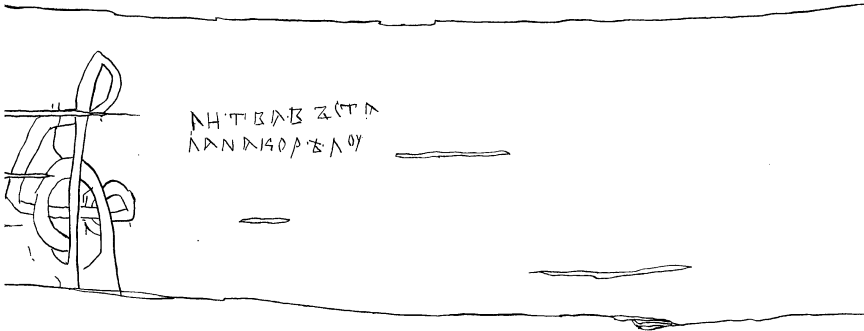


FIGURE 42 Drawing of N590 ('The Lithuanians have attacked the Karelians').

Figure 42 shows that N590 is written on a large piece of birchbark (more than 40 cm wide), although it consists of only a tiny message (a mere four words in relatively small letters). On the left side, there is a large drawing, perhaps of a knot, shaped much like a treble clef. As neither the sender nor the receiver is mentioned in the message, the drawing is presumably a sign or monogram that functioned as a password to identify the correspondents.

The dating and contents of the birchbark allow it to be linked to a historical episode recorded in the chronicles—that is, the 1069 campaign waged by Prince Vseslav Brjačislavič of Polock against Novgorod.<sup>9</sup> The principality of Polock was located southwest of Novgorod, in present-day Belarus. In the eleventh century, it was one of Novgorod's greatest rivals; its sphere of influence included the western part of the territory inhabited by Lithuanians and other Baltic tribes.

The campaign of 1069, in which the Lithuanians are known to have participated, was fought in the territory of the Votian people, speakers of a Finnic language who lived on the Gulf of Finland to the southwest of present-day St.

<sup>8</sup> NGB VIII (50–51), DND (244).

<sup>9</sup> First Novgorod Chronicle, in the entry for the year 1069 (NPL, 17; Michell and Forbes 1914, 5). See Janin (1998, 265–266), who points out that the 1069 campaign was the second time that Vseslav Brjačislavič went to war against Novgorod. The first hostilities took place three years earlier, in 1066; dozens of inscriptions in Novgorod's St. Sophia, which consist of the Slaviced Hebrew words *kuni roni* 'Arise, cry out', may be connected to the dramatic seizure of Novgorod and the plundering of the cathedral by Vseslav of Polock (see Gippius et al. 2012, 278–281).

Petersburg, and thus adjacent to Karelia, one of the major sites of Novgorodian colonization. It is very likely that N590 was a military-intelligence report, which was sent to Novgorod precisely from the war zone in Karelia.

Like the preceding birchbark, the next one was sent from the frontier and mentions neither the sender nor the recipient; this suggests that the sender wanted to preserve confidentiality in a sensitive communication (again, military intelligence):

A ransomed prisoner came from Polock and says (there is) a large army; so, provide wheat for the garrison.

(N636, ca. 1260–1280)<sup>10</sup>

The hostilities between Polock and Novgorod mentioned in N636 are most likely to have taken place after 1263, when Tautvilas, the Lithuanian prince of Polock, was killed. While Tautvilas had friendly relations with Novgorod, his successors on the throne of Polock assumed a more hostile posture.<sup>11</sup>

Another letter in the same handwriting is given below:

From the people of the fortress to the great *posadnik*. Lo, the people of the Jasenskij settlement have fled [...].

(N704, ca. 1260–1280)<sup>12</sup>

The places mentioned in this fragment were probably located at the southwestern boundary of the Novgorodian lands, near Pskov and relatively close to the principality of Polock, which is named in N636.

A century earlier, a conflict was taking place at the northeastern boundary:

[*Outer side*] From Sava, a bow to (my) brethren and companions. The people have left me, although they were supposed to collect the rest of the tribute before autumn and send it as soon as the road was passable, and go onward. But Zaxar'ja, having sent (a man), has declared on oath: "Do not let Sava collect even a single fox-pelt from them. I myself am responsible for that." And that is why he has not immediately afterwards settled accounts with me and has neither been with you, nor here. And therefore, I stayed on. After that, peasants came; they had got a man from Andrej (Bogoljubskij), and (his) people took away the tribute. And eight

<sup>10</sup> NGB IX (36–37), DND (482–483).

<sup>11</sup> See Janin (1998, 369–373).

<sup>12</sup> NGB IX (92–95), DND (482). See also Janin (1998, 370–373).

(men), who (were) under Tudor, violated (their oath of fealty). Be cautious in dealing with him, brothers, in case there is any difficulty about this there (in Novgorod) for him and his companions.

[*Inner side*] And it was the prince himself who gave his villagers parcels of land from Volok and from the Msta River. If, brothers, the people don't seek redress against me, and there is an investigation, I would gladly send a letter right now.

(N724, ca. 1160–1180)<sup>13</sup>

In N724, the author, Sava, is not just writing about a simple quarrel over tax collection; as comparison with the chronicles shows, he is referring to a larger historical event—a conflict between Novgorod and the principality of Vladimir-Suzdal' about tribute collection on the northeastern periphery of the Novgorodian lands (the Zavoloč'e). The town of Volok and the Msta River, mentioned on the inner side of the birchbark, were located in this contested region, and the arctic fox pelts mentioned on the outer side would be a common unit of tribute there.

The Zaxar'ja who causes Sava so much trouble was the *posadnik* of Novgorod from 1161 until his death in 1167. These dates coincide perfectly with the archaeological dating of the letter (ca. 1160–1180). At that time, the prince of Novgorod, who is mentioned on the inner side of the birchbark, was Svjatoslav Rostislavič. The Andrej to whom Sava alludes was a prominent figure in early Russian history—Grand Prince Andrej Bogoljubskij, who ruled in Vladimir from 1157 to 1174, and who pursued an expansionist policy against Novgorod's northeastern territories.

This is the historical background for Sava's tale of his own misfortunes.<sup>14</sup> (On the two linguistic registers that he uses, a more formal one on the outer side and his local tongue in the postscript on the inner side, see Section 1.7.) Evidently, Sava was collecting tribute from peasants to whom the prince of Novgorod had given land before the *posadnik* Zaxar'ja interfered. This points to a power struggle between the prince of Novgorod and the elected *posadnik*. Andrej Bogoljubskij has taken advantage of this strife to annex the territory; he has received not only the allegiance of the peasants but also the tribute money that Sava had been trying to collect.

13 NGB X (22–25), DND (350–354), NGB XII (258–268). See also Mendoza (2002, 304), Petrušin (2009), Schaeken (2011b, 356; 2017a, 128), Gippius (2015), Dekker (2018, 77–78).

14 Petrušin (2009) not only disputes the historical interpretation but also questions crucial chronological and paleographic aspects of the document. His main arguments are refuted convincingly in Gippius (2015) and NGB XII (258–268).

The Tudor mentioned towards the end of the outer side of the birchbark is evidently one of Sava's own men. Instead of complying with Zaxar'ja's order, he has broken away with several of the other Novgorodian officials. Worried that Tudor will come to grief because of this, Sava writes to his colleagues in Novgorod to try to help him; he indicates his willingness to provide information on Tudor's behalf if he is not in trouble himself.

## Non-Slavic on Birchbark

Writing on birchbark seems to have been practiced almost exclusively by the local population, mainly in Novgorod, and in particular by the upper social echelons. Though there was a significant non-Slavic population in the Novgorodian lands, its linguistic imprint can scarcely be perceived in the birchbark corpus. Only a handful of birchbark letters have been preserved in languages other than Slavic; the use of these other languages is reflected mainly in toponyms, ethnonyms, and personal names, most notably of Finnic (e.g., Karelian) origin (cf. N286 and N248, Section 11.8).

N292, which is given only in transcription here,<sup>1</sup> is by far the oldest surviving text written in a Finnic language—perhaps Karelian, though that is not entirely certain:

*jumolanuliinimiži*  
*nulisē[x]anoliomobu*  
*[xu]molasudʹnipoχov[i]*

(N292, ca. 1240–1260)<sup>2</sup>

Though specialists in Finnic languages have studied the text extensively, its content remains controversial; it has been suggested that it was a spell to ward off lightning. The first line contains words that can be translated as ‘God’s (Jumala’s) arrow’, and ‘thy name’; the second may include the verbs ‘shine’ and ‘shoot’; the third is the least clear of all.

Apart from a note in Old Novgorodian, the next text also contains some Finnic words that can be identified more easily:

From Mark, one box. In Sandalakša from Gymuj’s brother one and a half *belkas*.<sup>3</sup> From Mundanaxt 2 *belas*. From the Pjuxtins (?) one box, and in Pogija from the hired man one *belka*.

<sup>1</sup> Based on Vermeer (1991b, 332).

<sup>2</sup> NGB V (120–122). See also Holthoer (1981, 161–162), Xelimsij (1986, 255–256), Vermeer (1991b, 315–334), Orel and Torpusman (1995, 277–278), Levin (1997, 135), Winkler (1998, 25–28), Laakso (1999; cf. Laakso 2005), Franklin (2002, 270), Saarikivi (2007, 197; with additional references).

<sup>3</sup> A *belka* or *bela* is a squirrel skin; see SRJA XI–XVII 1 (130, 133–134).



		sour		belly
shame	command!	<i>xapala</i>	collected	<i>koxti</i>
<i>gulkija</i>	<i>kjaski</i>		<i>kjuzu vĕlĕkado</i>	<i>nindaly</i>
				(N403, ca. 1360–1380) <sup>4</sup>

The handwriting in this letter is the same as that in N286, written by Grigorij (see Sections 11.8 and 11.5.6). The top portion of the birchbark reflects his work as a tribute collector in the Karelian territories of Novgorod. (Sandalakša and Pogija were in the same region as the settlements mentioned in N248; see Section 11.8.) In the bottom portion of the birchbark, Grigorij has written some words from a Finnic language with their Russian translations. Apparently, he jotted down these words as a memorandum because he wanted to learn them. They are clearly not the kind of vocabulary that might be expected of a beginner. It can be inferred that Grigorij already had at least an elementary knowledge of the language spoken in the territories to which he had been assigned.

Birchbark N753 is empty apart from a few letters on the left side, which are shown here exactly as in the published Russian edition:

[.]ĪLGEFAL  
IM[K]IE

(N753, ca. 1050–1075)<sup>5</sup>

The legible portion of the message is written in the Latin alphabet. The first sign is unclear; it could be *p* or *t*, or perhaps a decoration. It is also uncertain whether the third letter in the second line is *k* (as indicated above) or *n*. Beneath the second line of the text are some scratches that could also be letters, though they could also be some form of ornamentation.

Thus, the reading of the birchbark is far from certain. It has been suggested that the language is Old Saxon, the earliest form of Low German. According to this interpretation, the first word could be either *pil* ‘arrow’ or *tīl* ‘target’. This is followed by the phrase *gefal im*, which is recognizably a form of the verb ‘fall’ plus the pronoun ‘him’ in the dative case. The next word is obscure; it could be *kie* ‘none’ or *nie* ‘never’.

Given the uncertainty of the reading, the overall meaning of the text is a matter of conjecture; it may have been something like ‘Arrow, do not strike

4 NGB VI (103–105), DND (598). See Xelimskij (1986, 254–255) and also Vermeer (1991b, 336–340), especially on the Finnic entries *kjuzu* and *vĕlĕkado*, which he convincingly interprets as *kjuzu vĕlĕkado* ‘collect (a) debt(s)’ for Old Novgorodian *socile* ‘collected’, and *nindaly*, consisting of the Finnic word *ninda* and its translation *ly[ka]* ‘(linden) bast’.

5 NGB X (50). See also Janin (1995, 219), Franklin (2002, 108–109, 270).

him' or 'Arrow, never strike him'. If so, it may have been a charm to protect a warrior from enemy weapons. Alternatively, the topic may have been 'God's arrow', i.e., 'lightning'; cf. the discussion above of the Karelian birchbark N292.

To date, sixteen texts on birchbark have been found in excavations in the city of Smolensk, approximately four hundred kilometers southwest of Novgorod. The following message is the only known birchbark to be written in Norse runes:

Vískarr has taken this piece of land.

(Smolensk 11, ca. 1140–1160)<sup>6</sup>

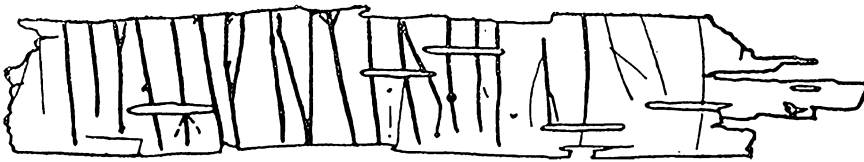


FIGURE 43 Drawing of Smolensk 11 (runic inscription on birchbark).

The runic inscriptions that have been found in numerous locations in Europe bear witness to wide-ranging Viking expeditions for plunder or for trade. It is not surprising that such inscriptions—runic and 'rune-like'—have also been discovered on East Slavic territory. The early medieval East Slavic elite—in particular, the ruling Rjurik dynasty—traced its origins to Scandinavia, and the fabled trade route 'from the Varangians to the Greeks' (i.e., from Sweden to Constantinople) largely went through medieval East Slavic territory (see Figure 3).

Runic inscriptions in Norse going back to the ninth century (on pieces of wood, stone, bone, and metal) have been found in Novgorod and at other locations in northern European Russia, including Suzdal', and also further to the south, in Smolensk and, along the Dnieper, in present-day Ukraine (for instance, Zvenigorod).<sup>7</sup> From the Novgorod excavations, we have a pig's bone with part of the runic alphabet incised on it, which can be dated to the first half of the eleventh century (see Figure 44).<sup>8</sup> Also, two runic inscriptions from the mid-eleventh century have been discovered on the walls of Novgorod's St.

6 Avdusin and Mel'nikova (1985, 208–211). See also Mel'nikova (2001, 207–208), Franklin (2002, 113), Astašova (2003, 208, 217), Düwel and Kuzmenko (2013, 352). Pereswetoff-Morath (2017) doubts the existence of runes or any other kind of writing on this birchbark.

7 See Mel'nikova (1977, 133–169; 2001, 87–272), Franklin (2002, 110–115), Düwel and Kuzmenko (2013).

8 See Makaev (1962), and also Mel'nikova (2001, 251, 451), Franklin (2002, 113).

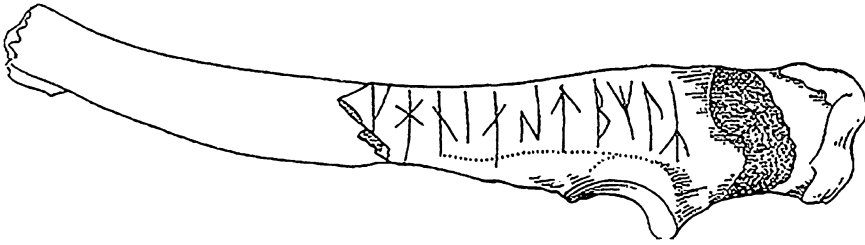


FIGURE 44 Pig's bone from Novgorod with part of the runic alphabet (*futhark*) incised.  
Note: After Makaev (1962, 310).

Sophia; one of them contains the Scandinavian name *Arni*, while the other does not yet have an interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

As can be seen on the drawing (Figure 45), N488 is written on a large piece of birchbark (28.5 × 15.5 cm) with perforations along its rim; it was evidently the recycled bottom of a basket (cf. N199 with Onfim's writings, Section 11.6). The text consists of six lines in Latin. The first three are from Psalm 95:1–2 (= 94:1–2 in the Orthodox numbering), a text that plays a prominent role in the Latin mass. The remaining lines are evidently also mnemonic aids for performing a Roman Catholic service.

*Venit[e], exultem(us) d(omi)no, iubilem(us) de[o s]alutari  
n(ost)ro, p(rae)ocupem(us) facie(m) ei(us) in (con)fessi(one)  
(et) i(n) psalmis  
iubile(mus) ei  
Viro. Viri. Virtute. Voce. D(omi)ne H(ymnus) M(ari)a V(irgo).  
V(ersus). Weni e(lecta)  
Libri testamenti sancti. Kalendae aprilis lectiones III ewangelii  
Deus est et*

(N488, ca. 1380–1400)<sup>10</sup>

It is not surprising that a text connected with the Latin rite should be found in Novgorod; N488 was discovered on the Trade Side of the city, on the site of the *Gotenhof*. This was the trading post for merchants from Visby on the island of Gotland, in present-day Sweden; ceramics from the Rhineland and wooden artifacts with the signs of Hanseatic merchants have been found on the same

<sup>9</sup> See Mixeev (2017, 165).

<sup>10</sup> NGB VII (80–83). See also Drboglav (1978), Picchio (1979–1980, 659–660), Vodoff (1981, 243, 271), Janin (1995, 219), Bulanin (1997, 153).

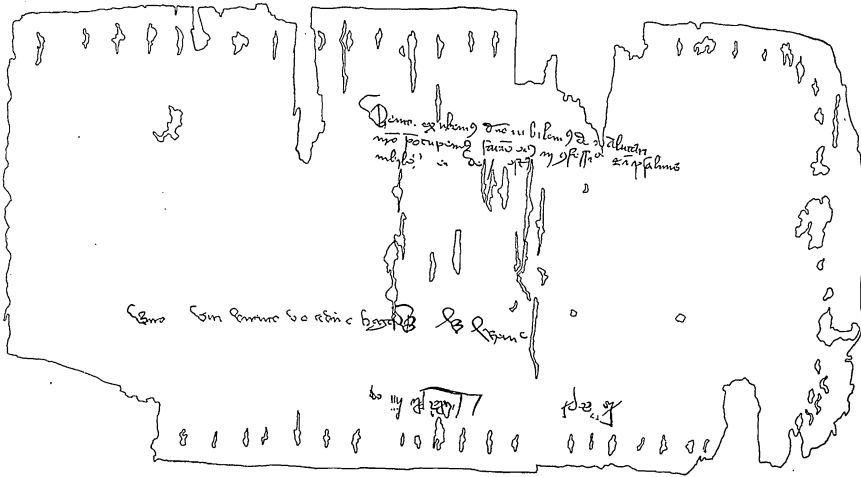


FIGURE 45 Drawing of N488 (Latin text on birchbark).

site (see also Section 1.1.1 on the Gotenhof and Section 1.2 on birchbark texts of Scandinavian provenance).

Finally, there is a birchbark that contains a phrase in Greek: *M(E)PKOYPIO TO ΣTPATIAATI*:

To the warrior Mercurius.

(N552, 1180–1200)<sup>11</sup>

Although it was discovered on the same site and at the same archaeological depth as texts explicitly connected with the icon painter Olisej Grečín (see Section III.5.4), there is no compelling reason to assume that Grečín was the author of this Greek text.

There could, of course, be various explanations for the message, but it seems plausible that it is a reference to an icon of St. Mercurius. The text may be a commission for an icon, comparable to the lists of saints found on the same site. St. Mercurius was especially venerated in Smolensk; several of the princes called upon to rule Novgorod in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries originated in that city.

11 NGB VIII (25). See also Vodoff (1981, 277), Blankov (2003), Gippius (2005b, 101–103).



### PART III

## *The Pragmatics of Communication*





# Introduction

Part III discusses the distinct characteristics of communication on birchbark and provides case studies of specific texts in their function of organizing and maintaining social networks, as they can be reconstructed.<sup>1</sup>

First, in Section III.2, we will examine letters that illustrate the ‘orality factor’ in birchbark communication. They show that, even as a written medium, birchbark letters could be ‘spoken’ and ‘heard’; moreover, this oral aspect was not trivial but rather a central part of the communicative events, which influenced the form and meaning of the texts themselves.

In Section III.3, the principal focus is on the key role of the messengers in the communicative event. The messengers are sometimes mentioned explicitly in the birchbark letter but, even when they are not, internal evidence often shows that they could be more than disinterested conveyors (‘letter bearers’); rather, they were frequently active participants in the entire written transaction, from start to finish. In some cases, they are even the beneficiaries of the business transaction with which the letter is concerned. Moreover, it can often be shown that the messengers were entrusted with additional information, i.e., that they were expected to expand upon or clarify the bare bones of the written text.

Section III.4 deals with what have been called ‘communicatively heterogeneous letters’—letters in which several persons are addressed individually, in ways that are unexpected, judging by the information in the opening formulas. Such letters cannot be read as continuous, coherent wholes; it has been shown that they consist of separate parts, which are not always explicitly demarcated from one another. Such internal divisions and shifts from one addressee to another (who may or may not be named) can be difficult to recognize, yet they are critical for a proper understanding of the structure and content of the letter and for an appreciation of the nature of the communicative event.

Several of the examples already discussed in Part II illustrate this phenomenon, in which there is a discrepancy between the addressee(s) explicitly

1 This chapter is primarily based on A.A. Gippius’s groundbreaking article on the pragmatics and communicative organization of birchbark documents (2004a; cf. also 2012a, 242–245). Subsequent studies in the field of ‘pragmaphilology’ are: Collins (2011), Gippius and Schaeken (2011), Schaeken (2011a; 2011b; 2014), Schaeken et al. (2014), Lazar (2014, 99–141), Mendoza (2016), Dekker (2018). Stern’s critical assessment (2016) of the pragmatic approach does not bring anything new to the table.



mentioned in the opening formula and the person(s) to whom the letter, or a given portion of the letter, is actually directed. In N424, Gjurgij writes explicitly only to his parents, but his grammatical choices show that he is directing his message to more than two people—presumably their entire household (see Section II.2). By contrast, Staraja Russa 39 and N370 are addressed to two people, but after the opening formula the verbs are singular, i.e., there is only a single intended recipient (see Sections II.2 and II.4). In N644 (Section II.5), Nežka addresses her diatribe to only one of her brothers, but in the course of scolding him she extends her criticism to her other brothers, whom she clearly expects to receive the message in some form (cf. also Pskov 6, Section II.2). Discrepancies of this kind are not particularly surprising, since they also occur in modern interactions. However, the communicatively heterogeneous messages to be discussed here lead us into less familiar territory. They can only be understood by taking the orality factor and, in particular, the special role of the messenger into account.

Part III closes with Section III.5, in which many of the birchbarks discussed in this book make their appearance once again. It will be shown that the authors, addressees, and individuals mentioned in the letters and notes are all part of larger social networks. These networks can be reconstructed for several periods of birchbark literacy, starting as early as the eleventh century.

Thematically, most of the birchbark texts treated in Sections III.2, III.3, and III.4 deal with commerce and finance, and law and administration. Some notable exceptions are N497, which is a personal invitation from Gavriila Postnja to his brother-in-law and sister, and N406, in which a peasant collective negotiates with their landlord Ofonos. In some instances, the topic of the message remains unclear, as in N79 and similar short texts treated in Section III.3.

## The Orality Factor

This section deals with a kind of orality that is very straightforward. Its main contention is that many birchbark letters were read aloud, instead of being read silently, as is the predominant habit nowadays. Evidence for this claim is gathered by means of a close-reading analysis of the texts, combined with a focus on the letters' pragmatic organization and contextual aspects.

From Žila to Čudin. Give Ondrej a rouble. If you won't give (it), any loss he will cause me to take because of that rouble is yours. From Žila to Sava. Give [...] a *poltina* (half a rouble) [...].

(N589, ca. 1340–1360)<sup>1</sup>

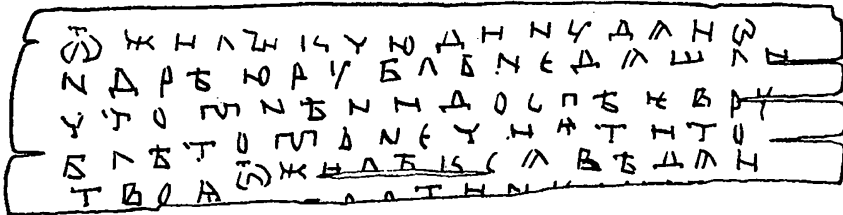


FIGURE 46 Drawing of N589 ('From Žila to Čudin' and 'From Žila to Sava').

Though the end of this letter is missing, enough has been preserved to make it clear that it is actually not one message but two, with separate addressees. The sender, Žila, begins with a command and a warning or threat addressed to Čudin, which ends at the fourth letter on the fifth line (see Figure 46). Then he immediately launches into a second message, which is addressed to Sava. It seems evident that Žila intended his addressees to hear this message rather than to see and read it themselves in the first instance. For at least one of them it would make no sense to receive and keep the letter in his possession. Otherwise, it would be difficult to explain why the two messages should be written on a single birchbark without any graphic demarcation.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> NGB VIII (49–50), DND (559–560), NGB XII (251). See also Gippius (2004a, 206), Mendoza (2002, 296), Lazar (2014, 119), Dekker (2018, 15).

<sup>2</sup> Lazar (2014, 119) suggests that the messenger was Ondrej, who is mentioned at the beginning of the letter. This is quite plausible in view of other examples discussed in the next sections; they show that letters could function as a warrant for the deliverer. The second message

Both letters on this piece of birchbark start with a greeting formula: 'From Žila to (...)'. In each case, the genitive form of the name Žila is spelled differently; in the first letter it is *Žily*, according to the supra-regional variant of Old East Slavic, whereas in the second letter we find *Žilě*, which is the local Novgorod dialect form (cf. Section 1.7). This may indicate the sociolinguistic awareness of the author, who estimated which of the varieties was more appropriate for each addressee.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas N589 has the same author but different addressees, the following examples have two letters with different authors:

From Radko to father, a bow. I have sent the goods to Smolensk. But they have murdered Putila, and they want to arrest me and Vjačeška instead of Foma, saying: "Pay four hundred *grivnas* or call Foma here, otherwise we will put you in jail." And a bow from Vjačeška to Lazor'. I have sent the packhorse, and I myself am ready.

(N952, ca. 1140–1160)<sup>4</sup>

N952 reflects the medieval legal procedure known as *rubež* ('confiscation'), which was already mentioned in the discussion of N246 (see Section 11.3). In an unnamed city, a Novgorodian visitor, Foma, is suspected of having murdered a certain Putila; however, he has thus far eluded capture. Therefore, in accordance with cultural notions of collective responsibility, two other Novgorodians, Radko and Vjačeška, who are visiting that city on business, have been told that they must assume the heavy financial liability for their compatriot's crime unless they can hand him over to the law.

Like the previous birchbark, N952 actually contains two separate messages; the second immediately follows the first without any graphic demarcation.<sup>5</sup> Though each message has a separate author, the birchbark is written in a single handwriting; this implies that at least one of the messages has been dictated. It is not certain whether the two messages were meant to be read aloud to separate addressees, since 'father' and 'Lazor' may have been one and the same person.

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might also apply to Ondrej; the lacuna between 'Give' and 'a *politina*' contains enough space (six letters) to reconstruct his name.

3 For another example in which this kind of sociolinguistic awareness is poignantly demonstrated, see N907 (Section 11.3).

4 NGB XII (46–49). See also Schaeken (2017a, 135), Dekker (2018, 72).

5 The same may also hold for the fragment N1017 (ca. 1240–1260), in which we find, rather unexpectedly, in the middle of the text the beginning of the opening formula 'A bow from [...]': (NGB XII, 115–116).

The following piece of birchbark also contains two separate messages:

[*Inner side*] From Zubec, half a new *grivna* and a knife worth eighteen.

[*Outer side*] A bow from Stepan to Potka. Figure it out yourself: you don't send me the armor itself, and you (don't send) me the money for the armor, and you (don't send) me *kunas* for the irons, nor silver, nor two pieces of meat.

(N750, ca. 1300–1320)<sup>6</sup>

The letter on the outer side of N750 is remarkable for the laconic way in which the sender, Stepan, tries to gain the cooperation of his addressee, Potka (a widespread nickname meaning 'Birdy'). Stepan makes no direct or explicit demands, threats, or reproaches; he simply works on Potka's conscience by stating the bald facts. Apparently, Stepan is a smith or weapons dealer. He asks to be paid in *kunas*, silver, or in kind (in pieces of meat). Payment in kind was frequent in medieval Russia, especially before the onset of monetarization in the Muscovite era.

The inner side of the same birchbark contains a separate message in the same handwriting, which is evidently not addressed to Potka. This text looks like a memorandum of items to be received from Zubec. It seems quite likely that this was a task that Stepan intended the messenger of N750 to perform. Presumably, therefore, he instructed him not to give the letter to Potka but rather to read it and/or show it to him; he would need to keep the birchbark itself in order to carry out his errand to Zubec.

The next message throws more light on the oral aspects that seem to be an essential part of communication on birchbark:

+ A bow from Domažir to Jakov. I hear from you what you say. If she is not pleasing to you, have (my) sister brought back to me. I had allotted (her share of the property) last year, and now I would have sent (it). And now I hear that my sister is sick. If God takes her, send her son to me along with her record (?); let (her) son stay a while with me, and I will be comforted by him, and I will send it (the record) back to the city. And if you don't carry this out, I will hand you over to the Holy Mother of God, to whom you went to take (your) oath.

(N705, ca. 1200–1220)<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> NGB X (44–46), DND (530–532). See also Gippius (2004a, 206).

<sup>7</sup> NGB IX (95–98), DND (422–424). See also Gippius (2004a, 207, 221–222), Mendoza (2002, 307; 2016, 126).

From what the author of N705, Domažir, writes, we can infer that his sister and nephew do not live in his establishment; thus, we can assume that his addressee, Jakov, is his sister's husband (or else the head of the household in which she is living). The main mystery in the text is the meaning of the word *znatbba*. This noun, which is otherwise attested in the senses 'mark', 'sign', and 'news',<sup>8</sup> clearly means something else in this context; it is tentatively translated here as 'record': a record of belongings or debts, or a testament? The associated verb can mean, *inter alia*, 'own, possess';<sup>9</sup> this supports the interpretation that *znatbba* had something to do with the sister's property.

From a pragmatic standpoint, it is important to note that we can take the opening statement 'I hear from you what you say' quite literally: Domažir is responding to a message from Jakov that has been read aloud to him. He also 'hears' that his sister is ill. As already noted, there is evidence that birchbark letters could be read aloud; in the case of N705, a subtle linguistic feature of the first sentence after the salutation in the original language seems to indicate that Domažir has listened to the oral delivery of Jakov's prior message.<sup>10</sup> (It should also be noted that in modern languages we can use the verb 'hear' even in reference to information from written texts; for example, the sentence *I haven't heard from you in a long time* can mean *I haven't received a message—letter or e-mail—from you in a long time.*)

A subtle hint about the messenger's role is hidden in the formulation of the following letter:

From Mestjata to Gavša and to Sdila. Get a horse for me. And Mestjata bows to you (both). If you need anything, send to me, and give (the messenger) a letter. And ask for money from Pavel, and Mestja[ta] (bows to you).

(N422, ca. 1140–1160)<sup>11</sup>

The author of this message, Mestjata, makes three requests of the addressees, Gavša and Sdila: to get him a horse; to stay in contact with him; and to get

8 SRJa XI–XVII 6 (52).

9 SRJa XI–XVII 6 (49–50).

10 This concerns the use of the preposition *u* instead of *otz* for 'from' in 'I hear from you what you say.' In DND (423) it is suggested that the use of *otz* would have meant a face-to-face encounter, whereas *u* implies that the message has been transmitted by an intermediary. This intermediary may well have been the messenger who delivered an earlier letter by reading it aloud.

11 NGB VII (29, 31–32), VIII (206), DND (297–298). See also Bulanin (1997, 159), Gippius (2004a, 210–213; 2012a, 243–244), Lazar (2014, 63–64).

money from a third party, Pavel. There is not enough information in the context to determine how these three requests relate to one another.

From a pragmatic standpoint, N422 is exceptionally interesting because of the phrase 'And Mestjata bows to you' after the first request and probably, in abbreviated form, after the last one. The rest of the text is written from Mestjata's first-person perspective, so it is curious that these phrases present him in the third person. Evidently, this can be explained by assuming that Mestjata is not the actual scribe of the letter; the greeting is presented from the writer's perspective rather than the author's.

While it is possible that the writer of N422 shifted out of Mestjata's perspective by accident, it seems more likely that the changes from first to third person and back again reflect the structure of the communicative exchange that was expected to take place between the messenger and the recipient. The letter was evidently intended to be read aloud; while the informative parts (the three requests) were meant to be perceived as coming from Mestjata's perspective, the formal greeting was meant to be perceived as the messenger's own 'voice' (perspective) during the reading event. It seems quite likely that the writer and the messenger of N422 were one and the same person; thus, he would be the person expected to deliver the greetings.

## The Role of the Messenger

So far, the presence and role of the messenger have only been inferred by circumstantial reasoning. We will now see a number of examples in which he is explicitly mentioned. We have already observed that the messenger was meant to read out the letter's contents to the addressee. In this section, we will discuss some birchbarks that show he also had additional tasks to perform, in order for the communicative process to proceed smoothly.

+ From Jakim and from Sem'jun to Dmitr. Give this servant a horse—the half-wild, gray one—and, if you please, help him to deliver (the shipment)—even as far as Korostoml'.

(N735, ca. 1140–1160)<sup>1</sup>

Not all of the terms in Jakim's and Sem'jun's letter are fully understood; thus, the word interpreted as 'half-wild' (*polubuiyi*) in the translation is an adjective of uncertain meaning, and it is unknown precisely where Korostoml' was located. However, these mysteries do not obscure the general meaning of the text.

The most significant feature of N735, from a pragmatic standpoint, is the interpretation of the demonstrative *this* in the phrase 'Give this servant'. Presumably, the two senders have in mind the person who will hand the letter to the addressee, Dmitr. In other words, 'this servant' is the messenger who, from the point of view of the reading event (Dmitr's perspective), has arrived with Jakim and Sem'jun's instructions to give him a horse and additional help.

There are other birchbarks featuring demonstratives that refer to the messenger, as can be seen in the following examples:

From Glebko to the people of Volok. Give this clerk 5, and the church *grivna* [...].

(N739, ca. 1120–1140)<sup>2</sup>

1 NGB X (34), DND (309–310), NGB XII (269). See also Faccani (2009, 331–333), Gippius (2004a, 199–200), Lazar (2014, 118).

2 NGB X (37), DND (291–292). See also Gippius (2004a, 200, 210).

From Žirjata, a bow to Radjata. Give this (man) what he has said—that grain.

(N879, ca. 1120–1140)<sup>3</sup>

These short letters resemble the preceding one, in that the demonstrative *this*, with or without further specification, refers to the unnamed messenger.<sup>4</sup> N879 is especially interesting because the author, Žirjata, uses the written text to authorize an oral message to be delivered by the messenger ('what he has said'). He chooses the past tense ('has said') rather than the present or future because he is orienting to the moment when his addressee, Radjata, is reading—presumably immediately after the messenger has conveyed the oral message.

Žirjata evidently adds the final two words, translated as 'that grain', because he wants to have the essence of his order in writing, just to be sure; the birch-bark functions as his written confirmation of the servant's message. It may be that he uses the demonstrative *that* rather than *this* because it refers to grain that has been mentioned in some earlier communication between Radjata and himself. What is more likely, however, is that it refers to 'what he has said', i.e., the messenger has just mentioned the grain in his oral request, which Žirjata anticipated in writing. He leaves the specific details for the messenger to convey in oral form.

A slightly different, but still explicit reference to the messenger can be found in the next example:

A bow from Mita to Luka and to Fral'. In the boat are 2 loads of hides and a box and a batch of wax; and Kur's small load of hides. Kur! Give a *grivna* and 3 *kunas*. [To my son] one and a half *gri[vnas]* [...]. The one who has the letter has the one and a half *grivnas*.

(N1054, ca. 1260–1280)<sup>5</sup>

'The one who has the letter' is obviously the messenger, who brought the one and a half *grivnas* that are mentioned in the main text. Another interesting feature is that a switch of addressee occurs in the middle of this letter: suddenly, another person is addressed, viz. Kur. We will see more examples of this kind in Section III.4 about so-called heterogeneous letters.

3 NGB XI (82–83), DND (368). See also Gippius (2004a, 205; 2012a, 244–245), Lazar (2014, 93–95), Mendoza (2016, 126, 129), Dekker (2018, 122, 124).

4 See also the comment on Pskov 6 (Section II.2, fn. 15) and Section I.7.

5 NGB XII (154–156). See also Schaecken (2017a, 135).



As in the case of Staraja Russa 39 (see Section 11.2), the following two letters reveal instances of the ‘epistolary past tense’ (see also Section 1.7):

Request from Semen to the priest Ivan. May you check up on my goods so that moths will not ruin (them); I request to you, my lord, in regard of my trunk. And I have sent the key with Stepan. And the mark (on the trunk) is an ermine.

(N413, ca. 1400–1410)<sup>6</sup>

It is logical to assume that the key was sent along with the letter. This implies that Stepan must have been the messenger, who delivered the request on birchbark as well as the key that was necessary to gain access to the goods. Semen apparently kept his valuable goods in the cellar of a church because the letter is addressed to a priest. This storage practice was not uncommon in medieval Novgorod because churches were made of stone and gave better protection from fire hazards than wooden houses.<sup>7</sup>

The pragmatics of the next letter can be explained in a similar vein:

A bow from Smenko the Karelian. He has come to you, lord, to the village of Pytar’. If you will grant him anything, then you, lord, give all the instructions. And I bow deeply to you, my lord.

(N243, ca. 1420–1430)<sup>8</sup>

The author does not mention the addressee, which happens rarely in communication on birchbark. Apparently, the messenger was familiar with the identity of the ‘lord’ who received this letter about a peasant who moves to his estate. It seems that this peasant was actually the carrier of the letter, bringing it with him to the landlord as some sort of ‘letter of recommendation’. This also means that the phrase ‘he has come to you’ can only refer to the reader’s temporal perspective, not the writer’s, because at the time of writing the peasant still had to start his journey.

The reference to the messenger in the next letter is less obvious:

[*Front*] + From Luka to father. The hired man who brought me didn’t give the money for the hides. And I sold him 6 *nogatas*’ worth of pans; that’s a

6 NGB VII (17–19), VIII (206), DND (662–663). See also Schaeken et al. (2014, 23), Dekker (2018, 118).

7 See DND (545–546), where another letter is discussed, N414 (ca. 1340–1360), which illustrates the same practice.

8 NGB V (65–66), VIII (197), IX (148), X (93), DND (674–675). See also Gippius (2004a, 212–213), Schaeken et al. (2014, 28), Dekker (2018, 124–125, 166).

full 2 (*grivnas*). And he is going (to Novgorod) on the boat with the goods. Take the 2 *grivnas* from him. If he dithers, then, having given him notice, let him go (into debt) for three (*grivnas*).

[Back]

(a) + From Lu

(b) And this is Goimer—the one in Černigov—with (his) wife; I don't remember (her) name.

(c) And here are 10 *rezanas* with the letter.

(N1004, ca. 1140–1160)<sup>9</sup>

The sender of N1004, Luka, has already been mentioned in the discussion of the landmark N1000 and of N1009 in Section 11.2 about letters dealing with commerce and finance. Luka was part of a social network that included Ivan, who may have been his brother, and Snovid, who may have been his father (see Section 11.5.5).

The main text of N1004 is quite clear. Away on business, Luka is writing to his father in Novgorod. He has sold goods to a certain 'hired man', a worker who left for Novgorod without paying him. Luka asks his father to collect two *grivnas* from this man when he arrives, and to demand a further *grivna* as a penalty if the man denies his debt.

On the other side of the birchbark, there are three notes in the same handwriting. The first one (a), '+ From Lu', is clearly the beginning of a salutation, identical to the one on the other side; it may be a false start (cf. N907, Section 11.3). Luka evidently began his letter on this side of the birchbark, then had second thoughts. Interestingly, the same phenomenon ('From L') can be seen in another letter from Luka, N1045 (see below).

The second note (b) is an addendum to the main letter; it evidently refers to the messenger, Goimer,<sup>10</sup> who is coming with his wife (whose name Luka has forgotten) from Černigov. Located in the northern part of present-day Ukraine, some eight hundred kilometers south of Novgorod, Černigov (Černihiv) is mentioned for the first time on birchbark; it was the capital of a mighty principality, also called Černigov. Apparently, it was important for Luka to introduce the messenger (and his wife) explicitly to his father, perhaps because he entrusted him not only with the letter, but also with money, as we can read in the last note (c): 'And here are 10 *rezanas* with the letter.'

Luka presents Goimer as if the latter were standing in front of his father: 'And this is Goimer.' Thus, he adopts the perspective of his addressee in the

9 NGB XII (102–104). See also Schaeken (2017a, 135, 136, fn. 30).

10 On the name Goimer, see Section 1.6.

reading event rather than his own in the writing event. The same kind of orientation has already been seen in previous letters, like N735 ('Give this servant'), N739 ('Give this clerk'), and N879 ('Give this (man)'), which were discussed at the beginning of this section. Significantly, in another letter to his father, N1006, Luka refers to the messenger in exactly the same way as the writer of N879:

[*Front*] × From Luka, a letter to father. Here's the cartload at eighteen *kunas* and 2 *grivnas*, including transport costs.

[*Back*] And give this (man) eight *nogatas*.

(N1006, ca. 1140–1160)<sup>11</sup>

The most recent addition to this group of birchbark letters from Luka is N1045, which was found in 2012:

[*Front*] + From Luka and from Mikula to Snovid. The two of us haven't bought anything: the squirrel skins from the Zavoloč'e region (were) 8 *grivnas*. And give us both some news as soon as possible. We would have been at home, but the roads! And I greet you all.

Send the money off to Domka <sup>14</sup> *kunas* out of the seven *grivnas* for Sava Gjurovič. Have it done before I get back, say that you're involved (in the matter).

[*Back*] From L

(N1045, ca. 1140–1160)<sup>12</sup>

The message consists of two parts, the first of which ends with a greeting. Though the opening formula names two authors and one addressee, the greeting is phrased in the opposite constellation ('and I greet you all'); for other examples of this kind, see Section III.1.

The second part (with '14 *kunas*' written between the lines in small letters) can hardly be an addendum relating to the messenger of the type we have seen in N1004 and N1006. It must be just a postscript for the addressee, added because the authors suddenly realized that they had more to say.<sup>13</sup>

A special case is N997, another letter written by Luka, as we can tell from the handwriting. However, Luka wrote it on behalf of a certain Negožir:

11 NGB XII (106–107). See also Schaeken (2017a, 135).

12 NGB XII (142–147). See also Schaeken (2017a, 129, fn. 15, 141–142).

13 The translation 'Have it done', in the second sentence of the postscript, is rather vague because it is not clear what the verb (*prisunuti*) precisely means.

[*Front*] [From] Negožir to Tešen. My two stallions are free of debt. And I sold (them) to Luka.

[*Back*] And [...] take from Tešen the *grivna* for Žiznomir. For Tešen from Ra[...] For Tešen<sup>14</sup> 2 *kunas*.

(N997, ca. 1140–1160)<sup>15</sup>

On the front of the birchbark Negožir explicitly mentions the writer of the text—or the writer mentions himself, for that matter—as a participant in the business deal: ‘And I sold (them) to Luka.’ The text continues on the back of the birchbark, in the same handwriting, but is no longer directed to Tešen, because he is now referred to in the third person (‘And [...] take from Tešen’). Apparently, the financial transactions mentioned on the back are further instructions from Luka (rather than Negožir) for the person who had to deliver the letter to Tešen.

The next example is one of the nineteen birchbark letters that have been discovered in Toržok, a medieval satellite of Novgorod located almost three hundred kilometers to the southeast, near the city of Tver’. The author, Onufrija, is writing to ask his mother to deliver a horse and coat to Lazar’, to send Petr back to him, and to let him know if anything prevents her from doing that:

+ From Onufrija to mother. Petr has gone to you, having taken Lazar’s horse and coat. Return the horse and coat, and send (Petr) himself here. If you do not send (him), then send me a message. I bow to you and greet you.

(Toržok 10, ca. 1200–1220)<sup>16</sup>

Pragmatically, the most interesting feature of Toržok 10 is the first phrase after the salutation, ‘Petr has gone to you’. While it is possible that Petr was already on his way when Onufrija wrote the birchbark, it is simpler to assume that he was the messenger who brought the letter to Onufrija’s mother. The use of the past tense (‘has gone’) is no barrier to this interpretation; cf. the common use of the past tense to signify an imminent future event in many modern and ancient languages.<sup>17</sup> Onufrija may imagine his messenger, Petr, ‘already gone’.

14 The second ‘For Tešen’ seems to be an erroneous repetition of the first instance.

15 NGB XII (95–97). See also Schaeken (2017a, 135).

16 NGB XI (126–127), DND (452), Malygin (2011, 93–96). See also Gippius (2004a, 200; 2012a, 247), Schaeken et al. (2014, 30–31), Dekker (2018, 128–129).

17 Cf., e.g., Modern Russian *Pošli!* ‘Let’s go!’, literally ‘(We’ve) left’, or *Pošel von!* ‘Get lost!’, literally ‘You’ve left!’, both with a directive nuance; or in English *I have gone to the city*, as a

The author of the next letter is from Rostov, one of the foremost cities of medieval Russia, which is located about five hundred kilometers southeast of Novgorod:

From Pavel from Rostov to Bratonežko. If the Kievan's boat has been sent, tell that to the prince, so that there will be no cause for reproach for either you or Pavel.

(N745, ca. 1100–1120)<sup>18</sup>

Given the date of this birchbark, the prince who is mentioned must have been Mstislav the Great, who ruled in Novgorod from 1088 to 1117 (except for the years 1094–1096), before becoming grand prince of Kiev, the titular overlord of the medieval East Slavic world.<sup>19</sup>

One of the most salient features of this letter is the fact that the name of the sender, Pavel, occurs in the third person at the end of the letter. This is reminiscent of N422 ('From Mestjata to Gavša and to Sdila. Get a horse for me. And Mestjata bows to you (both)'; see Section 111.2). As in that letter, so too in N745 it was presumably the messenger who acted as a scribe, writing down the letter from Pavel's dictation or instructions; he wrote the end of the letter from his own perspective, as if he has gone to Bratonežko and is now speaking to him directly, so that Pavel is indeed a third person in the interaction. The ending is therefore evidently phrased from the messenger's own referential perspective.

Having seen a number of more or less explicit references to the messenger, we will now turn to some extremely short texts, in which the presence of a messenger must be inferred to make sense of the texts and to find an explanation for the role they played in the communicative process.

As can be seen from the drawing (Figure 47), N79 is a complete document consisting of only three words:

*A vodai Mixa|levi*  
And give (it) to Mixal'.

(N79, ca. 1180–1200)<sup>20</sup>

note that the writer leaves behind at home, written, of course, before he departs (a clear example of the epistolary past tense already mentioned by Nutting 1916).

18 NGB X (40–41), DND (262–263), NGB XII (269). See also Gippius (2004a, 210, 213).

19 Janin (1995, 224; 2009a, 334–335).

20 NGB II (79), VIII (188), DND (380). See also Gippius (2004a, 200–201).



FIGURE 47

Drawing of N79 ('And give (it) to Mixel').

Like many other birchbark letters, this brief note may be an order for the recipient to give something (presumably known to both correspondents in advance) to—in this particular case—Mixel,<sup>21</sup> who could be either the messenger or someone outside the communicative event. However, if this were the scenario, it would surely be odd that the writer omitted the name of the addressee, which is almost always included in other birchbarks.<sup>21</sup> The fact that the addressee's name is not mentioned suggests quite a different scenario—that N79 is simply a memorandum to the messenger, which accompanies the goods that he is to deliver.

*Kosnjatinja | gramata*  
Kosnjatin's letter.

(N397, ca. 1180–1200)<sup>22</sup>

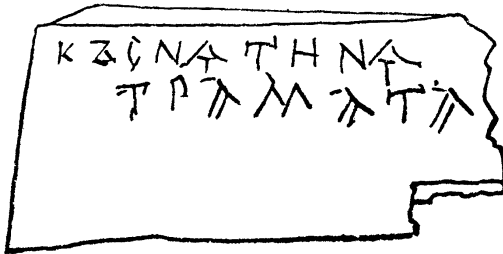


FIGURE 48

Drawing of N397 ('Kosnjatin's letter').

As the drawing shows (Figure 48), even though this piece of birchbark consists of only two words, it is—just like N79—a complete message rather than a fragment of a longer letter; there is no trace of writing above, below, or on either side of the text. The function of the birchbark is not entirely clear. It could be a label attached to goods or another text (a letter or official document that has not been preserved). However, given the prominent role played by the oral factor and the messenger in birchbark communication, as shown throughout this

<sup>21</sup> For an exception, see above, N243.

<sup>22</sup> NGB VI (98–99), DND (453). See also Bulanin (1997, 159–160), Gippius (2004a, 204), Dekker (2018, 24). Burov (1988) identifies Kosnjatin with the *posadnik* Konstantin Mikul'čič (cf. N241, Section II.3).

book, it is certainly not unlikely that N397 functioned as a ‘rudimentary’ written authorization, i.e., Kosnjatin’s warrant that he has empowered the messenger to deliver orally the essential information to be conveyed, labeled in the birchbark as ‘letter’ (*gramata*).

N397 is not the only ultra-short birchbark message that mainly consists of a name. For example, N443 is a complete text that looks like the salutation formula from a longer letter:

From Dmitr to Flar’ and to Nesdila.

(N443, ca. 1200–1220)<sup>23</sup>

Again, this might be a mere ‘address label’ attached to items being shipped from the sender to the addressees. On the other hand, like N397, it might be a warrant that Dmitr gave the messenger to show that he was authorized to act as his mouthpiece and agent.

N656 is also complete, except for a small lacuna about two letters in width on the left side (see Figure 49):

[From] Kulotka a letter to Xudo[ta]. Go to Pskov (and) tell (them).

(N656, ca. 1160–1180)<sup>24</sup>

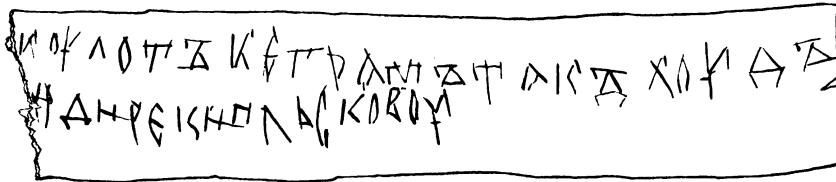


FIGURE 49 Drawing of N656 (‘Go to Pskov (and) tell (them)’).

Apart from the salutation, this letter consists of only three words: *idi* ‘go’, *reki* ‘tell’, *Pŭskovu* ‘to Pskov’. If this is a message that Kulotka sent by an unnamed messenger to Xudota, the question is how Xudota knew what information to convey in Pskov. He may have been given instructions on what to say beforehand; the birchbark would then be a signal that he was to proceed. Alternatively, Kulotka may have conveyed the necessary information through the messenger, who would have told it to Xudota in oral form. A third scenario is that Xudota himself was the messenger; Kulotka could have given him the

23 NGB VII (41, 46), X (110), DND (438). See also Gippius (2004a, 204), Dekker (2018, 24).

24 NGB IX (49), DND (357). See also Gippius (2004a, 204–205), Dekker (2018, 23).

birchbark as a warrant that he was to show in Pskov while relaying the unwritten information.

Our final example pertaining to the function of the messenger is a letter where the handwriting plays a crucial role in identifying his participation in the communicative event:

A bow from Gavril Postnja to my brother-in-law Grigorij, (my) *kum*,<sup>25</sup> and to my sister Ulita. May you come to the city, to my happiness, and not depart from our request. May God give you happiness. We will all not depart from your request.

(N497, ca. 1340–1360)<sup>26</sup>

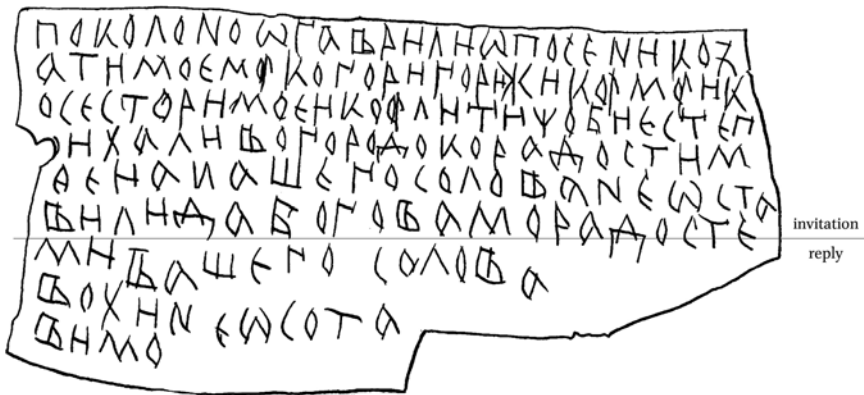


FIGURE 50 Drawing of N497 (invitation to come to the city and reply to the request).

Here, as elsewhere in the birchbark corpus, ‘the city’ refers unambiguously to Novgorod (cf., e.g., Staraja Russa 40, Section 11.5, which is quite similar in content). There would be no reason for the author of N497 to mention Novgorod unless his addressees were elsewhere. Given the birchbark was actually found in Novgorod, we can conclude that it made a round trip from the author, Gavril Postnja, to the addressees, Grigorij and Ulita, and back again.

In the first six lines of N497 (see Figure 50), Gavril invites Grigorij and Ulita to visit him in Novgorod. This makes the final three lines puzzling at first glance; since the entire birchbark is written in the same handwriting, it looks as if Gavril is also replying to a different invitation, which Grigorij and Ulita

25 A *kum* is a relative by baptism of one’s child; cf. SRJA XI–XVII 8 (116).

26 NGB VII (90–91), VIII (211), DND (563–564), NGB XII (244–245). See also Vodoff (1981, 269), Schaecken (2011a; 2014, 156–158), Mendoza (2016, 125–126), Dekker (2018, 26–27).



had extended in an earlier letter. However, there is a much simpler explanation: Gavrilā did not write the text himself; he employed a scribe, who also acted as his messenger. When he took the letter to the addressees, the messenger wrote down their response to the invitation on the same piece of birchbark ('We will all not depart from your request'), then brought it back to Gavrilā in Novgorod.

We have seen that the messenger's role is more extensive than just delivering a letter. In the previous sections, evidence has been shown of the various tasks the messenger could be expected to perform: write down a message as it was dictated by the author, go to the addressee, read the letter out to him, elaborate orally on the letter's contents, even write down a reply. All these actions required oral communication that goes beyond what is written down on the piece of birchbark. It is fully clear that the messenger is the pivot on which the whole communicative process hinges and that the written text is embedded in an oral encounter.

The messenger's extensive role has been inferred by close-reading. Without the messenger, the written communication could not come across successfully. This is one element that shows the strong context-dependence of the birchbark letters. The fact that the short messages are sometimes hard for us to understand is not only because we, as modern 'overreaders', do not know enough of the original context; without the messenger and the oral setting in which the letters were 'performed', the original addressees would not always have been able to make sense of them, either.

## Communicatively Heterogeneous Letters

The term ‘communicatively heterogeneous letters’ was introduced into the research field of birchbark documents by A.A. Gippius (2004a). It denotes a category of letters that are divided into several parts, each of which has a different author or addressee. We have already seen instances where one piece of birchbark could host more than one letter (see Section III.2), but the category of communicatively heterogeneous letters has a more convoluted structure. It consists of letters where the messages to or from different persons are more intertwined: various participants can be heard or addressed within the confines of one letter with a single address formula. Consider the following example:

A bow to madam, mother. I have sent you 20 squirrel skins with the *posadnik*'s (man) Manuil. And you, Nester, send me a letter about the helmet, (to let me know) with whom you will send it. And when you arrive in Toržok, feed the horses with good hay. Attach your own lock to the granary. And remain on the threshing floor when the threshing is being done. And have the horses fed with oats in your presence and in (good) measure. And in the barn rye [...] measure it again and the oats, too. And let (me) know who needs rye or oats [...].

(N358, ca. 1340–1360)<sup>1</sup>

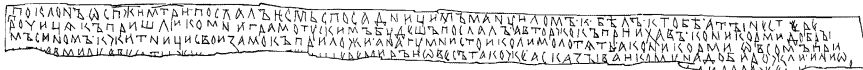


FIGURE 51 Drawing of N358 ('And you, Nester, send me a letter about the helmet').

N358 is complete except for some lacunae at the end. Though its author is not named in the opening formula, it is written in the same handwriting and to the same household as the next letter (N354), whose author is Oncifor Lukinič. Oncifor, a boyar from the prominent Mišiniči clan (see Section III.5.7), served as the *posadnik* of Novgorod between approximately 1343 and 1354; he died in 1367. He figures in several birchbark letters as the sender or addressee, and he is also mentioned in the chronicles.<sup>2</sup>

1 NGB VI (50–53), VIII (204, 247–248), DND (550–552). See also Gippius (2004a, 188–190), Dekker (2014, 2, 9; 2018, 16–17, 56, 119), Mendoza (2016, 124).

2 Janin (2003, 508), Xorošev (2009).

While Oncifor greets only his mother in the opening formula, his letter is actually directed primarily to a different addressee, who is mentioned in the third sentence, viz. Nester. Given the kinds of tasks Oncifor sets for him, Nester was evidently a steward or other upper servant in the household. In N358, Oncifor gives him an assignment of considerable responsibility, looking after the family's business in the satellite town of Toržok (cf. Toržok 10, Section III.3).

[*Inner side*] A bow to madam, mother, from Oncifor. Order Nester to get together a rouble and to go to Jurij, the business associate. Ask him to buy a horse. And go with Obrosij to Stepan, having taken my share. If he takes the rouble, buy another horse, too. And ask Jurij for a *poltina* (half a rouble) and buy salt with Obrosij. And if he cannot get the fur and the money for the journey, send it over here with Nester. And send two tripods, a fork, branding-irons, felt cloths, canvas covers, sacks, and a bearskin. Give instructions to ask Maksim, the manager, for wheat.

[*Outer side*] And ask grandfather to go to Jur'ev monastery (and) ask for wheat. And there is no hope (of getting it) here.

(N354, ca. 1340–1360)<sup>3</sup>

This birchbark is very similar to the previous one. It involves the same author, Oncifor, and the same addressee, his mother; and it likewise specifies tasks that Nester has to perform. However, it is not an entirely straightforward matter to determine exactly which parts are directed to Oncifor's mother and which to Nester. Clearly, Oncifor is asking his mother to issue a command to Nester ('Order Nester to get together a rouble'), but it seems doubtful on socio-pragmatic grounds that he is telling his mother to herself go horse-trading with Obrosij, negotiate with Jurij and Stepan, or buy salt. Rather, it is much more likely that the directives from 'Ask him to buy a horse' to 'and buy salt with Obrosij' are actually addressed directly to Nester. In this interpretation, Nester is the subject of 'Ask him to buy a horse', and 'him' refers to Jurij.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, whereas in N358 Oncifor addresses Nester explicitly ('And you, Nester'), in N354 he does this implicitly, without indicating the change of ad-

3 NGB VI (43–48), VIII (203–204, 246–247), IX (159), DND (550). See also Levin (1983, 160–161), Gippius (2004a, 189–190), Dekker (2018, 17–18, 83).

4 Note that this new insight is at variance with Levin's claim that "[a]lthough the son Ontsifor gives the instructions, his mother is qualified to carry out a wide range of administrative duties, including those dealing with the lucrative international fur trade. Ontsifor also expects his mother to go all over town to accomplish her business; this is evidence that women were not restricted to the *terem*." (Levin 1983, 161).

dressee from his mother to his servant. This is the difference between *overt* and *hidden* communicative heterogeneity.

The next letter has become a classical example of the hidden type, which can only be inferred by circumstantial reasoning:

From Petr to Vasil'. Give 6 *kunas* and a *grivna* to Vyšata. If he doesn't give (them), then send a court official after him.

(Staraja Russa 15, ca. 1140–1160)<sup>5</sup>

After Staraja Russa 15 was discovered in 1985, it was initially believed to reflect the following type of situation: Petr has taken a loan from Vyšata and given him collateral; he has also lent money to Vasil'. He now writes ordering Vasil' to repay the money that he owes (or part of it) directly to his own creditor, Vyšata. Petr also expects Vasil' to bring him his collateral, but he is worried that Vyšata will keep it; if that proves to be the case, he tells Vasil' to threaten him with legal action (a visit by 'a court official').

In its content and structure, Staraja Russa 15 seems to bear a strong resemblance to N241, discussed above (see Section 11.3), in which a creditor has sent a third party to collect a debt from his addressee. However, upon closer examination, Staraja Russa 15 proves to be much more complicated. In N241, the creditor consistently addresses his debtor, Ždan, by referring to him in the opening formula and using the second-person (singular) pronoun 'you' in the remainder of the letter. By contrast, according to the earlier interpretation, Staraja Russa 15 involves a switch of addressees: Petr begins by addressing his debtor, Vasil', who is to pay Vyšata for him; but in the third sentence he uses third-person pronouns ('he' and 'him').

The initial interpretation of the letter seems unduly complicated. In fact, there is a much simpler explanation: Petr is actually addressing two persons—Vasil', to whom he gives a command in the second sentence; and Vyšata, to whom he gives a warrant for action in the third. In this interpretation, there is no question of unreturned collateral; Vasil' is ordered to give 6 *kunas* and a *grivna* to Vyšata, and Vyšata is authorized to take legal action against him if he refuses. In essence, Petr is addressing both Vasil' and Vyšata, but one after the other rather than at the same time. It is as if he is standing before them and giving them oral instructions; first he turns to Vasil' ('Give 6 *kunas* ...'), then to Vyšata ('If he (i.e., Vasil') doesn't give ...').

5 NGB IX (104), DND (328–329). See also Gippius (2004a, 192–194, 199), Lazar (2014, 133–134), Dekker (2014, 2–3; 2018, 19, 42, 65).

In this second scenario, the real purpose of the letter is to give Vyšata a warrant for collecting money from Vasil'. It seems likely that Vyšata was intended to be the messenger; Petr gave him the birchbark to take to Vasil' as an authorization and as a warning in the event that he failed to comply with the instruction.

A similar scenario can be envisaged for N253:

From Maksim to the inhabitants of Desjatskoe. You are to give Mel'jan 8 measures (*dežas*)—interest and grain. And you, elder, collect (them).  
(N253, ca. 1360–1380)<sup>6</sup>

The sender, Maksim, who belonged to the Mišiniči clan (see Section III.5.7), is known from other birchbarks, including the next letter, N177. His father was the boyar Oncifor, the author of N354 and N358 (see above).

In N253, the translation 'Desjatskoe' used in the opening formula is not certain; derived from a root meaning 'ten', it could denote the inhabitants of a single village called *Desjatskoe*, or it could refer to the people of ten villages taken as a unit.

It is clear that Maksim begins with a command to all of the villagers, then gives an order to the elder (*starosta*) alone. Less clear is the relationship between this elder and the Mel'jan who is named in Maksim's directive to the villagers. Is the elder the villager whom Maksim appoints to give the rent to Mel'jan? Given the communicative structure of some of the birchbarks discussed above, it seems likely that Mel'jan and the elder are one and the same. Maksim is writing N253 as a warrant, which Mel'jan is to show to the villagers when he collects their interest and grain.

The next letter is from the same Maksim (Onciforovič) as the previous one and is similar in its communicative structure:

A bow from Maksim to the priest. Give the keys to Foma. And you send Grigorij Onfimov. If anything is needed [...] Foma.  
(N177, ca. 1360–1380)<sup>7</sup>

One of the interesting features of this birchbark, whose final part is missing, is the interpretation of the second-person singular pronoun (*ty*) in the third clause ('And you send'). In Old Novgorodian, subject pronouns were usually

6 NGB V (80–81), VIII (241), DND (583). See also Gippius (2004a, 188, 196–197), Dekker (2014, 4; 2018, 63, 180).

7 NGB IV (61–62), DND (582–583). See also Gippius (2004a, 196–197), Lazar (2014, 121–122), Dekker (2014, 15–17; 2018, 63).

omitted unless there was a change of subject;<sup>8</sup> cf. the last sentence of the previous letter, N253 ('and you (*ty*), elder, collect (them)'). Presumably, the explicit pronoun *ty* in N177 signals some change in referential perspective; it is evidently not the priest but Foma whom Maksim tells to send Grigorij Onfimov. In this scenario, it is plausible that Grigorij is supposed to collect the keys for Foma. Accordingly, even though the letter begins with a greeting to the priest, its initial recipient was Foma; he was supposed to give it to Grigorij, who in turn was supposed to present it to the priest as a warrant proving his right to collect the keys.

In the final fragmentary part of the birchbark, Foma is mentioned for the second time, now in the third person and as the subject of the sentence. It looks as if Maksim is addressing the priest directly, saying something about Foma, perhaps along the lines 'If anything is needed, Foma (will take care of it).'

From Voislav take 10 *kunas* principal and 5 *kunas* as interest: he hasn't paid the interest for two terms. | From Nežata take ten *kunas* and a *grivna*. | From Budota take a *grivna* as interest. | From Bojan take six *kunas* as interest in Ozerevy. And give the official a *kuna* each.

(N509, ca. 1160–1180)<sup>9</sup>

In the last sentence of this birchbark, the word rendered as 'official' is *otrok*, which we have already encountered, e.g., in N241 (Section 11.3) and Staraja Russa 15 (translated as 'court official'; see above). In those texts, the word 'official' is to be understood in keeping with the legal content. In N509, by contrast, the 'official' is evidently not a judicial functionary but a servant who collects taxes or tribute.

Letter N509 should be understood as a warrant, which the unnamed collector could show to those who had to pay the taxes or tribute. In the first four sentences (which are demarcated graphically with a vertical line), the verb 'take' is a second-person singular (imperative) and conveys instructions for the collector. In the last sentence, however, there is a shift to the second-person plural ('give'); it is evidently meant for Voislav, Nežata, Budota, and Bojan, each of whom has to compensate the collector with a *kuna* for collecting his money.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See DND (171–172), Dekker (2014, 7; 2018, 53–54).

<sup>9</sup> NGB VII (102, 104–105), IX (175), X (112), DND (361–362). See also Noonan and Kovalev (2000, 136–137), Gippius (2004a, 194–195, 201), Dekker (2018, 20–21).

<sup>10</sup> The unusual syntax of the final sentence suggests that the writer began to write a modal construction with a dative subject ('the collector is to take ...') but changed his mind and directly addressed the four men who owed money.

The communicatively heterogeneous nature of the next letter may well be less conspicuous:

A bow from Stepan to Smenko. Take from the Kanunnikovs ten salmon, and take another ten from Danilka Beškov; and give (them) to Smen Flarev. And I bow to you.

(N186, ca. 1360–1380)<sup>11</sup>

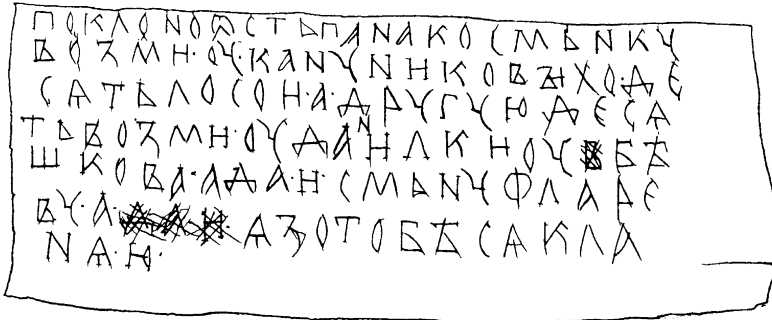


FIGURE 52 Drawing of N186 ('and give (them) to Smen Flarev').

This letter might well be interpreted as a straightforward order for Smenko (a diminutive of Smen) to collect salmon from two different households, the Kanunnikovs and Danilka Beškov, and deliver them to another man, Smen Flarev. However, in light of other birchbarks with similar instructions, it seems likely that N186 has a different communicative structure: Smenko and Smen Flarev are one and the same person. The use of different variants (hypocoristics) of a name is common in Old East Slavic; see, e.g., Marena ~ Marenka (N955, Section II.5), or Petr ~ Petrok and Jakun ~ Jakša (see Section III.5.3).

In this alternative scenario, N186 is intended as a warrant for Smen(ko) to present to those from whom he is collecting the salmon; the sentence 'and give (them) to Smen Flarev' is addressed not to him, but to Danilka Beškov and to whichever representative of the Kanunnikovs Smen(ko) has to deal with. These addressees are presented distributively rather than collectively, since the verb 'give' is singular. As can be seen in the drawing (Figure 52), three letters have been crossed out in the penultimate line. The writer began to write 'And give it to Smen Flarev, and give...'. Then he had second thoughts, struck out the second 'give', and continued with the closing formula. Conceivably, the crossed-out verb was not simply a mistake; the writer may have first intended

11 NGB IV (70–71), DND (618–619). See also Gippius (2004a, 217–218), Lazar (2014, 127).

to write separate commands for the representative of the Kanunnikovs and Danilka, but then realized that once was enough.

The communicative constellation of the next letter is quite complicated, due to the number of participants we need to keep track of:

From Panko to Zaxar'ja and to Ogafon. I have sold forty beaver skins to Miljata for ten silver *grivnas*. When you (*singular*) receive the money, then give (*singular*) the beaver skins. And give (*singular*) the money to Zaxar'ja.

(N420, ca. 1240–1260)<sup>12</sup>

We have already examined several letters (e.g., Staraja Russa 39 and N370, Sections II.2 and II.4) where two recipients are named in the opening formula, but only one is addressed in the main text. At first glance, this appears to be the situation in N420 as well. The author, Panko, addresses his letter to both Zaxar'ja and Ogafon, but he mentions Zaxar'ja in the third person in the last sentence; thus, it would seem that Ogafon was the intended recipient. However, there are two problems with this interpretation. First, it would be a bit strange if Panko gave Zaxar'ja's name in the opening formula such a prominent position, as the first one he addresses, without asking anything of him in the rest of the letter. Second, if Panko were sending the birchbark to Zaxar'ja along with money that he owes him, it is odd that he should include detailed information about his apparently unrelated sale of beaver skins to Miljata. Why would it be relevant for Zaxar'ja to know how Panko acquired the money to repay him?

The most plausible answer to these problems is that some parts of the letter are addressed to Zaxar'ja and others to Ogafon, and that each of the addressees is working as an agent for different parties. Since Zaxar'ja is the first recipient to be mentioned, he is presumably also the addressee of Panko's first directive—to deliver the beaver skins and collect the payment for them. On the other hand, Ogafon, as the second recipient to be mentioned, is the addressee of Panko's second directive—to give the money to Zaxar'ja to conclude the deal between Panko and Miljata. Therefore, Zaxar'ja is acting as Panko's agent, and Ogafon as Miljata's agent.

Thus, contrary to first appearances, Panko's letter is highly organized. In the opening formula, he mentions his addressees in the order of their relevance. He informs them about his deal with Miljata, which is relevant for them both.

12 NGB VII (28–29), VIII (206), DND (478–479). See also Kovalev (2003, 65–66), Gippius (2004a, 195–196), Lazar (2014, 122), Dekker (2018, 20).



Then he gives instructions to his own agent, Zaxar'ja, and finally turns to Miljata's agent, Ogafon. Presumably, when Panko finished the letter, he gave or sent it to Zaxar'ja as a warrant to show Ogafon before they conducted their business.

The next example of communicative heterogeneity to be discussed again concerns the person of the messenger:

Ofim'ja gives you notice: send a silver *grivna* for the girl. | Send notice with the boy. If you are long delayed long (sic), send notice.

(N771, ca. 1300–1320)<sup>13</sup>

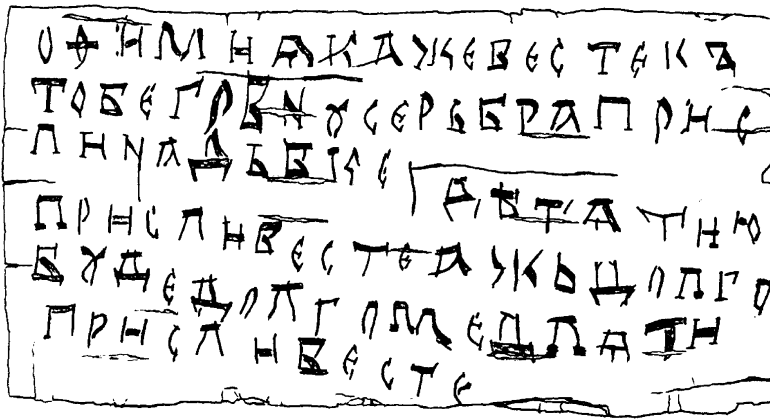


FIGURE 53 Drawing of N771 ('If you are long delayed ..., send notice').

N771 is a warning sent by a creditor, Ofim'ja, to an unnamed addressee, who has bought a slave girl but has not yet paid up. As can be seen in the drawing (Figure 53), the birchbark is divided into two parts by perpendicular strokes in the middle of the third line; moreover, the words that follow this separator ('with the boy') are on a slightly lower level than those that precede it. This graphic division suggests that the birchbark actually contains two messages rather than one.

The first message, preceding the separator, is evidently a projected statement (perhaps a formal legal declaration) that the unnamed messenger was supposed to make as Ofim'ja's mouthpiece. It begins in an unusual way, with a second-person pronoun rather than the name of the addressee; this implies

13 NGB X (64–65), DND (532), NGB XII (270). See also Gippius (2004a, 211, 217, 223; 2012a, 243), Schaeken (2014, 158–162), Faccani (2017, 182, 184).

that it was meant to be read aloud rather than handed to Ofim'ja's delinquent customer.

The second message, following the separator, was intended as a memorandum to the messenger. The author (presumably Ofim'ja himself) tells him to send a message 'with the boy' (a servant) if he is detained long on his errand.<sup>14</sup>

While the beginning of the following text, N406, has not been preserved, the surviving portion seems very similar to N136 (Section 11.4):

[...] and fish and butter and cheeses, and that is the rent for 3 years [...] And we bow to you, Lord Ofonos. And you know the tribute—3 marten for 3 years. And if he starts asking for (anything for his) wife or son, then for (his) wife 2 squirrel skins, and for (his) son a squirrel skin.  
(N406, ca. 1360–1380)<sup>15</sup>

Both birchbarks, N136 and N406, reflect negotiations between a group of peasants and their landlord about annual tribute payments, and both mention special gifts to be given to members of the landlord's family (in N136, 'for the children, each a squirrel skin'). However, whereas N136 is formulated as a contract, in which all parties involved are represented in the third person, N406 is an interpersonal communication, in which the landlord is mentioned explicitly in the second person ('And we bow to you, Lord Ofonos'). At the same time, the pronoun 'he' in the sentence 'And if he starts asking ...' also seems to refer to the landlord Ofonos.

If this is indeed the case, the shift from second to third person marks a change in the communicative situation. The first part is directed to the landlord, and the second (beginning with 'And if he starts asking ...') to the messenger, as in the previous letter, N771. Evidently, the messenger of N406 is to act as the peasants' spokesman; thus, the first part of the letter conveys what he should offer to the landlord at the beginning of the negotiations, while the second tells him what to promise if Ofonos demands more. In this interpretation, the messenger would clearly be expected to read the letter to Ofonos instead of handing it to him.

Three birchbark texts have been discovered in Zvenigorod (Zvenyhorod), located in Galicia (Halyč), in the west of present-day Ukraine, more than a thou-

14 A similar graphic demarcation can be found in N1075 (second half of the fourteenth century), which contains a fragmentary letter from Jurij (Onciforovič?) to Onanija and, to the left of this message, with a vertical stroke in-between, an instruction for the messenger (see Gippius et al. 2017, 8–9).

15 NGB VII (11–12), VIII (250), IX (163), DND (593–594). See also Dekker (2018, 15–16).

sand kilometers southwest of Novgorod (see Figure 4). Now a village, Zvenigorod was a major city at the time the following letter was written. It is a letter from a widow to someone who was in debt to her late husband, Goven:

+ From Goven's (widow) to Neženec. Give 60 boat-*kunas* (i.e., 60 *kunas* for the boat). Goven said (this), going to Judgment, and the priest wrote (it) down. And give (it) to Luka. If you don't give (it), then I will come, taking an official (constable) from the prince with me; and it will go into more (expense) for you.

(Zvenigorod 2, ca. 1120–1140)<sup>16</sup>

The widow is acting on instructions that Goven gave while 'going to Judgment', i.e., while dying; these were recorded by his spiritual father ('and the priest wrote (it) down')—the usual procedure for medieval testaments. While the text seems relatively straightforward in translation, it actually features a significant grammatical complication, which is ultimately of pragmatic interest. The participle *poema*, which is translated as 'taking' ('taking an official ... with me'), should agree with the subject of the main clause, which is in the first person; thus, one might think that it referred to the author, Goven's widow. The problem is that it is grammatically masculine rather than feminine. Assuming that this is not a mistake and a regular grammatical feature for the time the birchbark was written, it must mark a change in perspective, from Goven's widow to Luka, the messenger who is to act on her behalf. Accordingly, it is Luka who will deliver the warning 'then I will come, taking an official (constable) from the prince with me' if Neženec refuses to pay. This change of perspective seems particularly plausible if Luka is not only the messenger but also the writer of the letter; he starts from the widow's viewpoint, then naturally switches into his own when he becomes the focus of the utterance.

The birchbark letters in this section have shown us that the phenomenon of communicative heterogeneity is tightly bound up with the function of the messenger, who delivered the letter and participated in an oral dialogue with the addressee. This is one of the main indicators of context-dependence: the birchbark letters are not only about affairs of everyday life in terms of content, but are also phrased in such a way that they can only be understood with recourse to the immediate context. Thus, the category of communicatively heterogeneous letters could only exist thanks to the 'oral' mindset that was

16 Svješnykov (1990), DND (346–347), NGB XII (274–275). See also Gippius (1991; 2004a, 200, 215, 220), Fałowski (1998), Noonan and Kovalev (2000, 139), Franklin (2002, 184), Toločko (2008), Schaeken (2014, 162–165), Dekker (2018, 28–29).

intertwined with the procedure of written communication. The distinction between overt and hidden communicative heterogeneity is especially significant; the hidden type is more context-dependent, and more reminiscent of a face-to-face conversation. A practice like this would be unacceptable in our day, because of the rigid standards we have adopted in letter writing. This is mainly due to the fact that our letters are far less firmly tied to the context, but are expected to operate independently, as entities in their own right.

## Social Networks

### 5.1 Introductory Remarks

On several occasions throughout the book, we have come across instances where the same person occurs more than once in the birchbark corpus; he or she can be identified as being the same in text A as in text B.<sup>1</sup> This cannot always be established with certainty. However, we can be absolutely sure of the identification when the name of the person belongs to the sender of multiple letters in the same handwriting.<sup>2</sup> We can also feel quite confident (a) when the shared name occurs in letters discovered in the same archaeological layers at the same site or in nearby sites, although the level of certainty may be lower in the case of common baptismal names like Ivan, Petr, or Ana; (b) when the name appears in multiple letters with the same sender and/or recipient; and (c) when the person so named has a consistent social profile (e.g., engages in the same business), judging from the content of the letters. In some cases, names in the birchbark letters can be linked with individuals known from other historical sources—in particular, the First Novgorod Chronicle, which has been cited repeatedly in the previous sections.

In trying to establish whether shared names refer to the same individual, it is especially helpful to determine whether the senders and addressees of the given letters can be placed within a network of correspondents known from other birchbarks. In this section, we will examine a number of such networks; while some are small, others contain dozens of individuals connected through business dealings, family, or personal life. We will revisit many of the birchbark texts that have been discussed throughout the book and discover that they do not stand on their own but belong to larger social networks.<sup>3</sup>

Keeping in mind the different degrees of plausibility of the identification of shared names and, consequently, the relationships (links) between individuals, the schematic visualizations offered in this section are to a certain

1 This section (especially III.5.5) is an adapted and expanded version of Schaeken (2017a, 136–146).

2 Such a group of texts is called a ‘block’ (*blok*) in the editions (see DND 17).

3 In DND, blocks and other groups of texts that are closely connected to one or more individuals are clustered together in ‘articles’ (*stat’i*, indicated by a letter plus a number, e.g., ‘A 19’ or ‘B 17’; see DND 228). The networks and accompanying diagrams represented below offer a larger picture of these social connections by combining multiple blocks and articles.

extent a hypothetical reconstruction of all possible connections that can be established. The diagrams should help the reader to gain some kind of understanding of the general picture, which clearly illustrates that communication on birchbark was deeply integrated in specific social strata and groups of medieval Novgorodian society.

The different types of symbols and links used in the diagrams are the following:

- Triangle symbols: ► indicates that the name mentioned is the sender of a letter; ◄ indicates the addressee; and ▲ refers to individuals who are mentioned in the text by the sender (or the author when we are dealing with a note or administrative list that was meant for personal documentation rather than communication by means of a letter).
- Links between sender and addressee are represented by a solid line with an arrow (→). A dotted line (---) indicates the relationship between X, mentioned in the text (by means of ▲), and Y. Y can be either the sender of a letter in which X is mentioned or another individual who appears in the same text. For instance, in Figure 54 we see that Pavel and Zavid are mentioned on the outer side of N736 (N736a), and are connected with a black dotted line to Ivan, who is the author of the letter. In turn, Ivan is linked by a solid line with an arrow to Dristliv, who is the recipient of N736a. The solid line between Ivan and Dristliv is double-headed because on the inner side of N736 (N736b) we find Dristliv's answer to Ivan (see Section 11.2).

In the case of the Luka-Ivan and Jakim networks (Section 111.5.5) and the network of Grigorij (111.5.6), we will discuss some extra symbols and links that are only relevant for these particular networks.

It should also be noted that in some cases we find 'incomplete' relationships. For instance, in Figure 55 a certain Zavid occurs, who wrote N798, in which Marena is mentioned; the relationship between the two is indicated by a dotted line. However, the diagram does not show the recipient of N798, because the fragmentary birchbark has a lacuna right on the spot where the name of the addressee is mentioned.

In other cases, there are names in birchbark texts that do not appear in the diagrams because no identification can be established with the same names in other birchbarks. The list of names in N935 (upper left corner of Figure 57), for example, not only contains the names Boris, Grečín, Gavřila, Radjata and Jakim, but also other individuals like Fedor, Vasil', Sidor and Griga, who are not included in the diagram.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in the upper right corner of the same diagram, Lazor' is mentioned as the addressee of the second message in N952

4 On Griga, see Section 1.1.3, fn. 46.

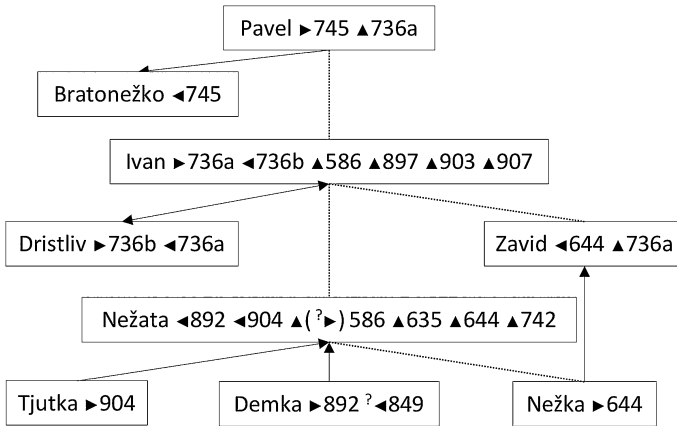


FIGURE 54 The network of Pavel, Ivan, and Nežata.

(see Section III.2); all the other individuals who appear in N952, including the sender of the second message, Vjačeška, are left out because they are otherwise unknown in the birchbark corpus.

## 5.2 The Network of Pavel, Ivan, and Nežata

Figure 54 shows the oldest network that will be discussed here.<sup>5</sup> It has been established from names found in birchbark letters from the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries.

All twelve of the letters in this network were discovered in Ljudin End, the neighborhood to the south of the citadel on the Sophia Side of the city (see Figure 2). The following letters are quoted at length in this book:

- N586: a letter or note ‘from Nežata’,<sup>6</sup> in which Ivan (in fact, ‘Ivan’s coat’) figures.
- N644: Nežata is mentioned in a letter from Nežka to Zavid; it seems that they are all siblings.
- N736: Ivan writes to Dristliv on one side of the birchbark (N736a), where he refers to Pavel and Zavid, and Dristliv replies to him on the other (N736b).

<sup>5</sup> Most of the letters in this network are treated in articles A 19 (‘Letters connected with Pavel and Ivan’) and A 20 (‘Letters connected with Nežata’) of DND (262–270). The only exceptions are N907 (A 13; DND 255–257) and N849 (B 22; DND 318–319).

<sup>6</sup> The opening formula is ambiguous; it may point to a note or instruction (‘(to receive) from Nežata’) or to a letter ‘from Nežata’, which simply states the name of the person who demands the goods that are mentioned (DND 266).

- N745: a letter from Pavel all the way from Rostov to Bratonežko; in his letter he mentions the prince, Mstislav the Great.
- N907: Ivanko (in fact, 'Ivanko's peasant') occurs in a letter from Tuk to Gjurgata.

It is clear from the concentration and directionality of the arrows that the network as represented in the birchbark corpus has two central members—Ivan and Nežata. In N907, Ivan is called Ivanko. He can be identified as Ivanko Pavlovič (that is, 'Ivan, son of Pavel'), who was the *posadnik* of Novgorod in 1134–1135; in N736, we meet father and son.

From the content of N644, it is clear that Nežka was the sister of Nežata and Zavid. The fact that the names Nežka, Nežata, and Bratonežko have the same root (realized as *než-*) may suggest that Bratonežko ('Brother-Nežko'), addressed by Pavel in N745, was also a member of that family, which obviously belonged to the upper strata of society and had direct access to the prince; cf. N745, in which Pavel asks Bratonežko (one of his relatives?) to inform the prince as soon as 'the Kievan's boat has been sent'.

In the case of N849, the diagram includes a question mark because it is far from certain whether Demka, who is the author of N892 (addressed to Nežata), is the same person as the recipient with the name Demša—a hypocoristic of Demka—of letter N849.<sup>7</sup> If there were more evidence to substantiate this conjecture, we would be able to establish a direct connection between the network discussed in this section and the next one, which revolves around the author of N849, namely Petr.

### 5.3 The Network of Petr, Jakša, and Marena

The network depicted in Figure 55 is reflected in letters dated to the second and third quarter of the twelfth century.<sup>8</sup> The following are treated in this book:

<sup>7</sup> See DND (269, 318).

<sup>8</sup> More than half of the texts included in the diagram are discussed in article B 22 ('Letters connected with Petr (Petrok), Jakša and Marena') of DND (313–322). Note that one of Petr's letters, N550, is of a relatively late date (ca. 1180–1200) and treated elsewhere in the edition (article B 91, DND 401–402). It should also be pointed out that the diagram does not include N844 (ca. 1140–1160; DND 317) because the very fragmentary text only consists of the name of the senders, the inhabitants of Imovolož'; perhaps it was sent to Petr, just like N885 ('From the inhabitants of Imovolož' and of Žabny to Petr and to Jakša. We have gone to Mljov, and Ivan (is?) not (...) to us [...]'). which is in the same handwriting as N844 (DND 316–317; on the toponym Imovolož', see Kryš'ko 2006).



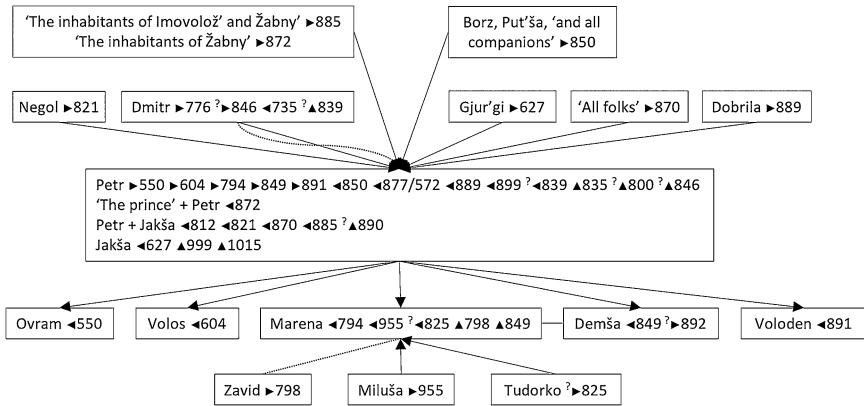


FIGURE 55 The network of Petr Mixalkovič, Jakun (Jakša) Miroslavič, and Marena.

- N550: a business letter from Petr to Ovrām.
- N735: Jakim and Sem'jun write to Dmitr about a 'half-wild, gray' horse.
- N955: a marriage negotiation, which involves Marena and Miluša, and Snovid and 'Big Braid'.

The central figure in this network is Petr, also known as Petrok. As already mentioned in Section 1.5, Petr often dictated his letters rather than writing them himself; this can be seen from the fact that several of the letters in his name (N550, N604, N794, N849, and N891) are in different handwritings.

Historical research has established that Petr was the boyar and high-ranking administrator Petr Mixalkovič.<sup>9</sup> Also in the network is Marena, who was probably Petr's wife; he addresses her in N794 and mentions her in his letter to Demša, N849. Marena is also the addressee of N955.

Petr clearly played a leading role in the Novgorodian governmental and legal system, to judge from the number and contents of the letters that he wrote and received. He is even paired with the prince in the fragmentary letter N872 (ca. 1140–1160): 'From the inhabitants of Žabny to the prince and to Petrok (...).'<sup>10</sup> The prince is mentioned explicitly by name in letter N850 (ca. 1140–1160), which is addressed to Petr, namely Svjatopolk, who was in office between 1142 and 1148. Interestingly, there are no examples on birchbark of acting princes mentioned by their name and without their title (cf. N88, Section 1.1.2, fn. 37). This may suggest that the letter dates from the period immediately after

9 On Petr Mixalkovič and his social entourage, see Janin (2001a, 6–30; 2003, 174–182; 2008b, 198), Gippius (2003; 2004b, 164–174; 2012a, 238).

10 NGB XI (77), DND (317).

Svjatopolk was expelled by the Novgorodians, i.e., 1148 or shortly after.<sup>11</sup> In his letter to his wife Marena, N794, which is dated somewhat later (ca. 1160–1180), Petr asks her to address the prince directly if he is going to take action in a specific matter ('... then you tell him (the following): ...').<sup>12</sup>

In several other letters, Petr is paired with Jakša, who has been identified as the *posadnik* Jakun Miroslavič. In birchbark N999, Jakša appears in a letter from Luka: 'From Luka to father. Sow the grain at Tudor's, and give 2 *grivnas* to Jakša; from Tudor's wife take 2 *grivnas* (...).'<sup>13</sup> We will return to Luka in Section 11.5.5 below. Jakša may also have been the owner of a wooden bowl of the mid-twelfth century with an inscription that bears his name; it was found in the vicinity of the site where Petr's correspondence was recovered.<sup>14</sup> This particular site (Property E of the Trinity Excavation in Ljudin End) must have been the place of the city court, where Petr and Jakša were among the leading figures.

#### 5.4 The Network of Olisej Grečin and Miroška Nesdinič

This section covers a network that is dated about one or two generations later than the previous one (between the 1170s and 1190s).<sup>15</sup> A direct connection can be established between the two networks because Olisej Grečin was most probably the son of Petr Mixalkovič, which makes him, including his patronymic, Olisej Petrovič Grečin.<sup>16</sup>

Two texts that are shown in Figure 56 have been quoted at length in the preceding sections:

- N502: Miroška (who is called Mirslav in the birchbark) Nesdinič writes to Olisej Grečin about Gavko from Polock, whom Olisej should place 'before

11 NGB XI (63–64), DND (317–318).

12 NGB XI (25), DND (320–321).

13 NGB XII (97–99).

14 See DND (313).

15 All the texts are treated in article B 93 of DND (403–409), except for N601 (article B 101, DND 424–425) and Staraja Russa 17 (article B 123, DND 446). In both cases it remains unclear whether they belong to the network. Depending on the interpretation of the content of N601 and its precise dating, the *posadnik*, who is not mentioned by name, might be Miroška Nesdinič. This might also hold for the sender of Staraja Russa 17, who calls himself Mirslav, although the handwriting differs from N502 (see Section 11.3). For a tentative connection between Olisej Grečin and the Greek inscription on birchbark, N552, see Section 11.9.

16 On the life and work of Olisej Grečin see primarily Gippius (2005b; 2012a, 239–240).

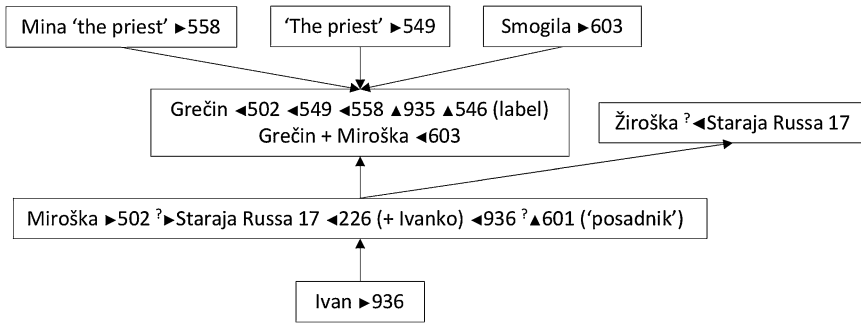


FIGURE 56 The network of Olisej Grečin and Miroška Nesdinič.

the witnesses that he mentions' in the event that 'he has seen how I arrested Ivan.'

- N549: A priest asks Olisej Grečin to paint him 'two six-winged angels on two small icons above the Intercession.'

As already mentioned in Sections 1.1.2 and 1.1.3, as well as in the discussion of N502 (Section 11.3), Miroška Nesdinič was a prominent boyar and the *posadnik* of Novgorod from 1189 until his death in 1204.<sup>17</sup> The two letters, N502 and N549, show that Olisej Grečin had two different occupations: he was an artist (icon and fresco painter) and was involved in legal matters (court official). He was also a priest, and was an (unsuccessful) candidate in the elections for a new bishop in 1193. His artistic role can be inferred not only from N549 but also from N558 (ca. 1180–1200),<sup>18</sup> in which the priest Mina asks Olisej Grečin to 'be here before St. Peter's day with the icons.'

Apart from N502, Grečin's judicial activities are also clear from N603 (ca. 1160–1180),<sup>19</sup> in which Smogila informs Olisej Grečin and Miroška Nesdinič that he, as 'you both know', didn't win the lawsuit. Smogila continues by saying: 'it's your lawsuit; now, my wife paid the 20 *grivnas* which was promised to Prince Davyd.'

As already mentioned (Section 1.1.3, fn. 46), Miroška also appears in N936 (ca. 1160–1180),<sup>20</sup> in which he is the addressee of a letter from Ivan. The letter has survived in a very fragmentary state, but we can discern the name Luka in the message he sends. Grečin figures in N935 (ca. 1180–1200; see also Section 1.1.3, fn. 46),<sup>21</sup> a list of names (of debtors or investors), in which a certain

17 See Gippius (2004b, 174–179); for further references see Section 1.1.3, fn. 46.

18 NGB VIII (30, 215), IX (176–177, including a new drawing), DND (407–408).

19 NGB VIII (66–67), IX (177), X (115), DND (404). See also Faccani (1995, 26–27, 120–121; 2003, 233–234).

20 DND (408–409), NGB XII (34–35).

21 DND (408), NGB XII (32–34).

Jakim is also mentioned. Ivan and Luka, as well as Jakim, are the most prominent figures in the networks that will be discussed in the next section. As we will see, these networks can be related not only to Miroška Nesdinič and Olisej Grečin, but also to Olisej's father, Peter (see Section III.5.3).

## 5.5 The Luka-Ivan and Jakim Networks

In addition to the symbols and links explained in Section III.5.1 above, Figure 57 shows some extra features:

- Round symbols: ○ means that Jakim was the scribe of the text (Jakim's block); ● stands for scribe A of the Luka-Ivan network; ● refers to scribe B of the same network.
- Links: dotted lines in grayscale (---) are drawn between networks, in particular the network of Petr, Jakša, and Marena (see Section III.5.3), and that of Olisej Grečin and Miroška Nesdinič (Section III.5.4).

The networks represented in this section are based on more recent birchbark finds, which were published in the latest edition in the series of the Russian Academy of Sciences.<sup>22</sup> If we were to look beyond this edition, the networks could be expanded even further. This is the case, for instance, for Xotoslav, who occurs not only in N1020 but also in N654 (as the addressee) and N805, as the diagram shows (upper right corner). As a matter of fact, Xotoslav is connected through Ivanko (the sender of N654) to a certain Ortem'ja, who is the addressee of another letter sent by Ivanko, N667.<sup>23</sup> In turn, this Ortem'ja is part of a group of texts connected with a certain Seraf'jan.<sup>24</sup> From there, we can further pursue other connections by means of shared names. Therefore the Xotoslav that we show in the diagram in relation to the Jakim block was part of an even larger network of people who communicated with each other on birchbark.

The Luka-Ivan network, which is represented in the lower part of the diagram, can be dated to the mid-twelfth century. In this book the following texts have been treated:

- N999: Luka instructs his father to sow the grain at Tudor's, give Jakša 2 *grivnas*, and take from Tudor's wife the same amount of money. We have already encountered Jakša, i.e., the *posadnik* Jakun Miroslavič, as part of the network of Petr, Jakša, and Marena (Section III.5.3).

<sup>22</sup> NGB XII, which covers N916–N1063.

<sup>23</sup> See article B 79 in DND (388–389).

<sup>24</sup> See article B 78 in DND (385–388).

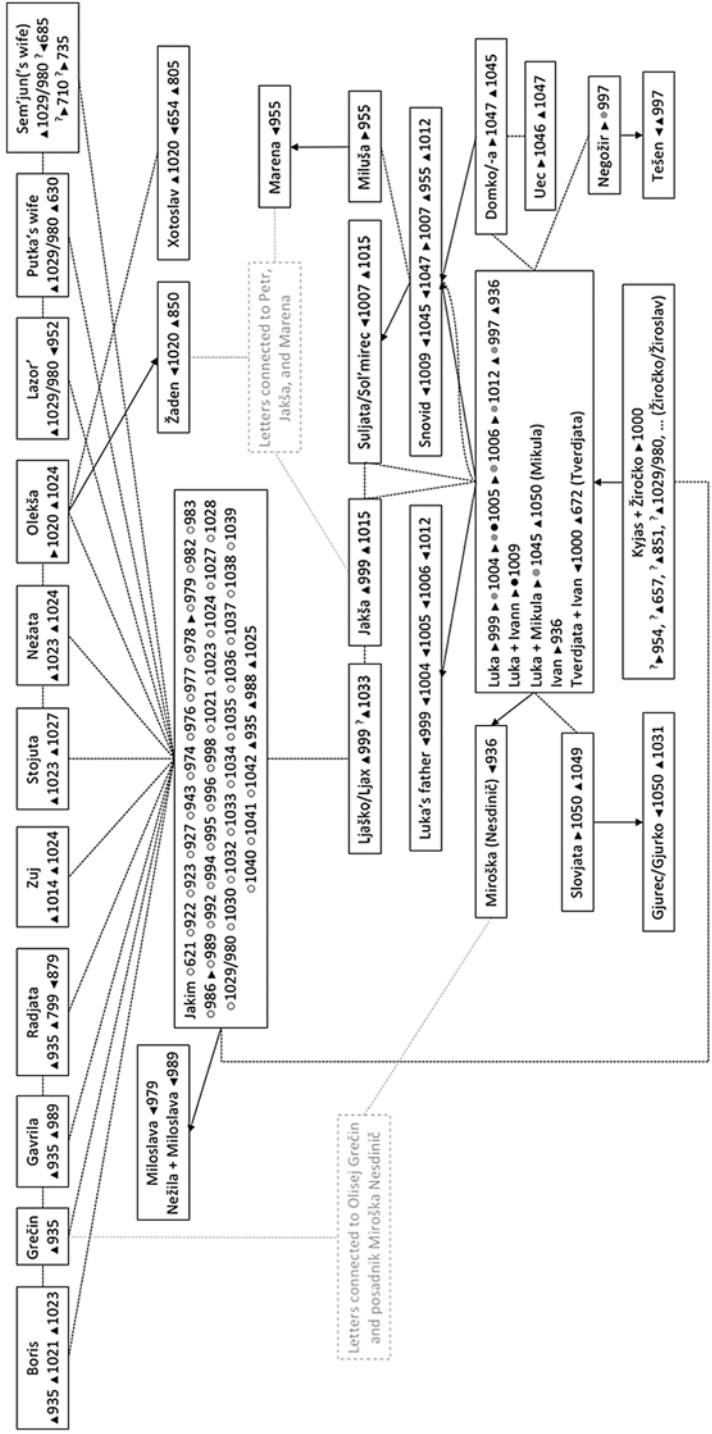


FIGURE 57 The Luka-Ivan and Jakim networks.

- N1004: Luka asks his father to collect money from a worker who left for Novgorod on a boat with the goods without paying him.
- N1005: A letter (written by scribe A on the front and by scribe B on the back) about the arrival of wine and thirty pieces of glassware from Velikie Luki; the name of the sender (on the front) is Luka and the addressee is his father.
- N1006: Luka informs his father about the arrival of a cartload.
- N997: Negožir writes to Tešen about two stallions that have been sold to Luka.
- N936: Ivan writes a letter to Miroška, in which the name Luka appears. We have already met Miroška, i.e., the *posadnik* Miroška Nesdinič, in the network discussed in the previous section.
- N1009: Luka and Ivan write to Snovid that they ‘are both fine’ and that he should get some overseas merchandise.
- N1045: Luka and Mikula inform Snovid about their business and that they would already have been at home, ‘but the roads!’
- N955: a marriage arrangement between Big Braid and Snovid, organized by Miluša and Marena. Marena, who is the mother of the bride, is also part of the network of Petr, Jakša and Marena (Section III.5.3).
- N1000: Kyas and Žiročko inform Tverdjata and Ivan that they ‘are both fine’.
- N954: Žiročko and Teško ask Vdovin to tell Šil’ce that he has to stop ‘damaging other people’s pigs’.

On the basis of paleographic evidence in combination with the contents of the letters, we can identify Luka as scribe A (●) and Ivan (also spelled Ivann) as scribe B (●). This means that Luka wrote N997 on behalf of Negožir, in which Luka mentions himself in the third person (see the combination of the symbols ▲ and ● in the diagram), and that N999 was written by someone else on behalf of Luka. The analysis would also imply that N936 was not written by Ivan himself.

According to the edition,<sup>25</sup> there is good reason to assume that Luka and Ivan were not only close business associates but also relatives, probably brothers. Luka might have been the elder, because he clearly takes the lead in N1005 when writing to his father. Their business was extensive; they traded in different kinds of grain, hides and furs, horses, wine, glassware, and pans. It seems that they went on long trips away from Novgorod, while their father, to whom they sent their messages and instructions, was based in the city. As argued in the edition,<sup>26</sup> their father may have been Snovid, who is not only addressed by

<sup>25</sup> NGB XII (106, 144).

<sup>26</sup> NGB XII (111–112).

Luka and Ivan in N1009 and by Luka and Mikula in N1045, but also figures in Luka's fragmentary letter N1012 (ca. 1140–1160). There is a complication, however, if we take into account that N1012 contains both 'father' and 'Snovid': '[From Luka?] a bow to father. I am fine (...)', and in the text on the back of the letter where the beginning is missing, '[...] to Snovid. And I myself am waiting for the *grečniki* merchants.'<sup>27</sup> Identifying Snovid as Luka's (and Ivan's) father would only be possible if the text on the back were no longer addressed to his father, but to the messenger, who is instructed to deliver the letter to Snovid. This scenario is certainly plausible in the light of other birchbark texts where the messenger is explicitly addressed in the text (see above, Section III.3).

In any case, it is clear that Luka, Ivan, their father, and—or: who was known as—Snovid, were in close contact with each other as well as other business partners about their commercial activities. Their network contains people from the upper strata of Novgorodian society, including the *posadniks* Miroška Nesdinič and Jakun Miroslavič, and Marena, the wife of the boyar Petr Mixalkovič, who played a leading role in Novgorod's administration around the middle of the twelfth century.

The Jakim network is represented in the upper part of the diagram and was active roughly one or two generations later than the Luka-Ivan network. The central character is Jakim, whose letters can be classified chronologically between the sixties and the mid-nineties of the twelfth century. The following letters have been discussed in the previous sections:

- N977: a mnemonic aid in the handwriting of Jakim, meant for a priest or a choirman who had to learn the text of a liturgical hymn.
- N992: a fragmentary text written by Jakim, which is entirely crossed out and can only partly be reconstructed: '[+] And [I from] the priest in [Gr]od[i...] (Gorodišče?) [...] + And for 5 ells of red cloth a *grivna*. And for parchment a [g...] (*grivna*?).'
- N1036: a snippet in Jakim's handwriting, written on the vertical axis, which only reveals the beginning of the name Jakim.
- N935: a list of persons, among whom we find Jakim, along with Olisej Grečin and others. As we can see in the diagram (on the left side), the names mentioned in this list connect the Jakim network with the Luka-Ivan network, via the network of Olisej Grečin and Miroška Nesdinič, who is addressed by Ivan in N936 (see Section III.5.4).
- N879: a letter from Žirjata addressed to Radjata, who is also mentioned in the list N935.

<sup>27</sup> NGB XII (111–113, including a detailed explanation of the word *grečnik*).

- N952: a letter from Radko to his father, and a letter from Vjačeška to Lazor'. This Lazor' is probably the same person as the one who occurs in N1029/980 (ca. 1180–1200), a list of debtors that is in Jakim's handwriting.<sup>28</sup>

Jakim's network can not only be connected with the Luka-Ivan network through N935 and N936, but can also be connected through Jakša (N999, N1015) and Marena (N955), i.e., the network discussed in Section III.5.3, with Žaden, who appears in N850 and N1020 (see the right side of the diagram). N850, which can be dated rather precisely (1148 or slightly later; see Section III.5.3), is a letter 'from Borz, Put'sha and all companions to Petrok.' On the outer side of the birchbark, Žaden is mentioned. Apparently, the same Žaden shows up in N1020 (ca. 1160–1180), where he is the addressee of a letter from Olekša.<sup>29</sup> Olekša himself occurs in N1024 (ca. 1180–1200), a fragmentary text written by Jakim.<sup>30</sup>

As for Jakim's writing activities, these constitute by far the largest block on birchbark; the diagram shows no less than 37 documents written by Jakim himself, who has turned out to be the most productive writer in Novgorod. Jakim identifies himself only rarely; his legacy on birchbark mainly consists of notes, which reveal a wide range of activities dealing with church practice as well as household management, perhaps at the same time or in different stages of his life. No doubt Jakim was a trained and well-educated scribe, who could skillfully draw up an outline of a *troparion*, and organized supplies of parchment and other monastic goods, like oil and headgear. Other documents show Jakim in his role as the manager of a large boyar household, where he dealt with the exchange of all kinds of commodities (for instance, N1023 mentions oat, beans, peas, barley, linseed, rye, and salt)<sup>31</sup> and took care of the financial administration, which included handling substantial sums of money, as in N1021, which speaks of a transaction of approximately 3,100

28 NGB XII (127–128). The list N1029/980 also mentions Sem'jun's wife. For chronological reasons, it is doubtful whether this entry can be connected with N735 (Section III.3), a letter from Jakim and Sem'jun to Dmitr, and two other birchbark texts in which the name Sem'jun occurs (see the numbers in the upper right corner of the diagram, all marked with a question mark). Although there is not enough evidence to identify all these characters, it is nonetheless rather implausible that we are dealing with four different Sem'juns in the same time frame (NGB XII, 127).

29 NGB XII (117–118).

30 NGB XII (123). In addition, it might also be possible, as the diagram shows, though to a lesser degree, to link the Luka-Ivan and Jakim networks through N999 and N1033 (Ljaško/Ljax) and N1029/980 (Žiroslav); see Schaeken (2017a, 143–144).

31 NGB XII (120–123).



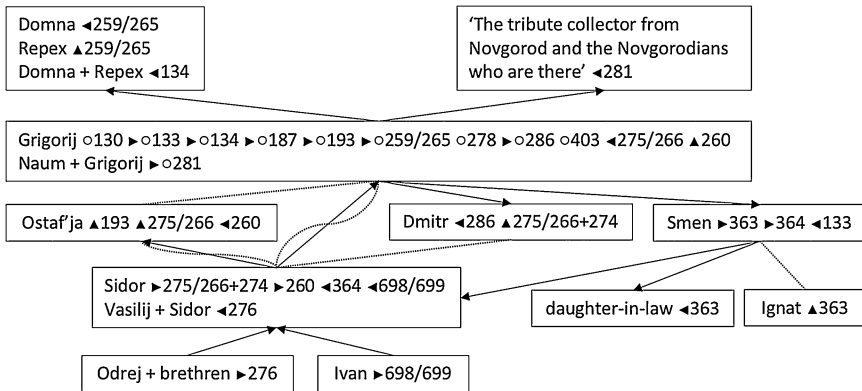


FIGURE 58 The network of Grigorij.

squirrel skins for the very large amount of 2,233 *kunas* (i.e., approximately 89 *grivnas*).<sup>32</sup>

The 62 texts presented in Figure 57 show that more than forty percent of the 146 texts found in Novgorod between 2001 and 2014 and published in the twelfth volume of NGB are interconnected in terms of shared names on birchbark and participation in social networks. The percentage is even considerably higher (over sixty percent) if we only take account of the texts that reveal personal names and/or belong to a block whose writer is known (approximately 90 out of 146). In the total number of 146 texts, we can count about 150 different personal names;<sup>33</sup> almost two-thirds of these individuals figure in the Luka-Ivan and Jakim networks.

## 5.6 The Network of Grigorij

The network shown in Figure 58 is of a much later date than the ones discussed in the previous sections, which are essentially all connected to one another over a period of more than a century: from the late eleventh to the end of the twelfth century. This network starts in the early years of the mid-fourteenth century and contains all the birchbarks written by Grigorij.<sup>34</sup> His writings date

<sup>32</sup> NGB XII (118–119).

<sup>33</sup> See the index of NGB XII (177–191).

<sup>34</sup> All of Grigorij's texts are treated in article G 56 of DND (595–602). Articles G 57 and G 58 (DND 603–608) discuss the other birchbark texts presented in the diagram. On Grigorij's presence on birchbark, see mainly Medynceva (1984), Vermeer (1991b, 340–349; 1992, 419–423), Janin (1998, 71–81, 153–161).

over a span of some thirty years and include seven letters or fragments of letters and three debt lists. All these texts are in the same handwriting (indicated by the symbol  $\circ$  in the diagram); thus, we may conclude that they were written by Grigorij himself.

The following texts belonging to Grigorij's network are included in the book:

- N286: one of Grigorij's letters in which he writes to Dmitr (who was probably his brother) about tax collection matters in the Karelian territories of Novgorod.
- N403: a business note by Grigorij, which includes a brief list of Baltic Finnic words with their Russian equivalents.
- N363 and N364: two letters from Smen, which were unearthed rolled up together; one to his daughter-in-law and one to Sidor. The same Smen is the recipient of a business letter from Grigorij, N133 (ca. 1360–1380), in which the latter addresses Smen as 'my lord'.<sup>35</sup>

Grigorij did not only act as a tax collector, as N286 shows; some of his other letters indicate that he must also have been a senior assistant to an important boyar in Nerev End, north of the citadel on the Sophia Side. This can be inferred from a letter he wrote to a subordinate, N259/265 (ca. 1360–1380),<sup>36</sup> which reads 'An order from Grigorij to Domna. I have sent you a bucket of sturgeon [...] And don't you yourself linger there; you go back to Luga. And you, Repex—listen to Domna, and you, Fovr.' Similarly, in N134,<sup>37</sup> which dates from the same period, he writes, 'An order from Grigorij to Domna and to Repex. While getting the little hut and barn in order, send Nedan to Luga before St. Elijah's Day.'<sup>38</sup>

## 5.7 The Network of the Mišiniči Clan

The family tree depicted in Figure 59 covers seven generations of the Mišiniči, a famous boyar clan.<sup>39</sup> Except for Jurij Mišinič (first generation), Ivan (third), and Luk'jan (fifth), all the names are attested on birchbark, in approximately fifty letters that span some hundred and fifty years, starting around 1280.<sup>40</sup>

35 NGB III (71–72), VIII (192), IX (135), DND (599).

36 NGB V (85, 91–93), VIII (199), X (95), DND (600–601).

37 NGB III (73–74), DND (600).

38 St. Elijah the Prophet is commemorated on 20 July, which marked the beginning of the harvest season (Agapkina 1999; Ryan 1999, 132–133).

39 See Janin (1981, 7–57).

40 Cf. DND (511) and also Section 1.1.2, where the *posadniks* of the Mišiniči clan are listed.

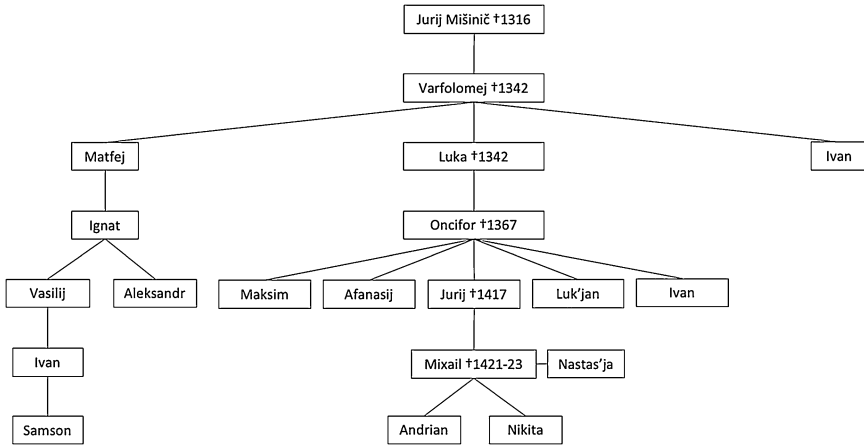


FIGURE 59 Family tree covering seven generations of the Mišiniči clan.

Note: Adapted on the basis of Janin (1981, 54) and DND (511).

Some of the birchbarks that can be associated with the Mišiniči have been discussed in this book:

- Ignat (fourth generation) is mentioned in N363.
- Ignat's cousin Oncifor is the sender of N354 and N358.
- Oncifor's sons Maksim and Jurij (fifth generation) are the joint addressees of N370.
- Oncifor's son Maksim is also the sender of N177 and N253, and the addressee of N272.
- Jurij's son Mixail (sixth generation) is the addressee of N311.
- Mixail's wife Nastas'ja and their sons Ondrejan and Mikita (seventh generation) are the addressees of N307.

Among the more recent birchbark finds (of the year 2016) that are not included in either DND or the latest edition of NGB is N1075, whose author might in principle be Oncifor's son Jurij (see Sections I.1.2, fn. 21, and III.4, fn. 14). Afanas in N1077 (see Section II.3, fn. 41) may be identified as Afanasij, another son of Oncifor. Another (hitherto unknown) son of Oncifor, called Ivan, figures in N1079; one of the addressees of this letter might be his brother Jurij (see Section I.1.2, fn. 21).<sup>41</sup>

While the Ivan mentioned in the third generation does not figure in any of the extant birchbarks, he appears in an inscription on a beautifully decorated wooden spoon (Figure 60): 'Belonging to Ivan, son of Varfolomej' (*Evanova*

<sup>41</sup> See Gippius et al. (2017, 8–14).

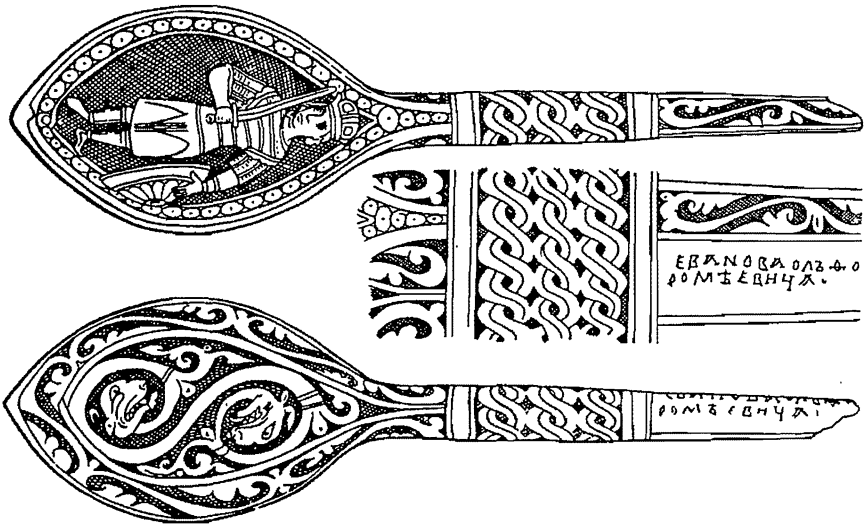


FIGURE 60 Wooden spoon of Ivan Varfolomeevič.

*Olzforoměevica*). This artifact was found on the same site as N389 (ca. 1320–1340), written by Ivan’s brother Luka, whose death is recorded in the chronicles in the entry for the year 1342.<sup>42</sup>

42 NGB VI (88–90), IX (115), DND (539), NGB XII (235).

## Some Final Thoughts

The collection of birchbark texts offered in this overview is a modest portion of the total corpus that has been researched meticulously over many decades by Russian scholars: archaeologists, philologists, linguists, and historians. Among the many Russian scholars who have been fully engaged in ‘the fine art of berestology’, the archaeologist V.L. Janin and the late linguist and philologist A.A. Zaliznjak should be mentioned in the first place.

The selection of texts in this book is, hopefully, representative of what the total corpus stands for: a unique legacy in several respects. To begin with, it is unique because it is an unparalleled collection of texts written in the medieval Western world from which it has come down to us. Across time, beyond its medieval borders, the corpus is one of the most comprehensively investigated sets of documents in terms of its language, its archaeological setting and historical contents, and its pragmatic use in everyday life. And it is still expanding, year by year, as it has been since 1951, when the first birchbark text was uncovered.

The language of the birchbark corpus has revealed a local vernacular that differs fundamentally from the medieval East Slavic language as we know it from parchment documents. Detailed investigations have brought us new insights into the linguistic shape of the Common Slavic period, where the Novgorod dialect has proved to be the oddest one out. The birchbark corpus has also shed new light on the embryonic formation of what eventually became standard Russian. While this standard is primarily the result of the ‘Rise of Moscow’, some elements can be traced back to features that were inherent to the Novgorod dialect.

Archaeological findings have been most important in determining the broader historical setting in which the birchbark corpus can be placed. Many of the artifacts uncovered during annual excavations have shown us the international economic dimensions of the city of Novgorod. The legendary trade route ‘from the Varangians to the Greeks’ has become tangible through the eyes of merchants on the road who used birchbark to communicate with the city. The East-West route, too, stretching from the Asiatic East to the Volga River, and to the Baltic Sea and beyond to Western Europe, can be witnessed in detail.

The results of archaeological research have also greatly contributed to a detailed understanding of the specific nature of sites where birchbarks have been unearthed and the social composition of the city. Archaeologists investigate finds in layers, determine their age, and then relate them to each other

and to finds in adjacent sites. The total sum of evidence is crucial for philologists and linguists to arrive at the most plausible interpretation of the texts and to identify people whose names and personal circumstances have survived on birchbark.

Philologists and linguists rely not only on the archaeological context but also on the circumstantial evidence that is sometimes provided by other sources in 'domestic' writings, ranging from official parchment documents (most importantly, the First Novgorod Chronicle) to names scratched on church walls (starting with the St. Sophia in Novgorod). At the same time, the names of some individuals attested on birchbark have also survived in historical sources that testify to the relations of the city of Novgorod with the world 'outside', with other principalities on East Slavic territory and far beyond, as an international hub for traders. Undoubtedly, Hanseatic documents are one of the most prominent witnesses. All this evidence gives us a unique opportunity to further reconstruct comprehensive sets of social networks, and eventually a full-fledged prosopography of medieval Novgorod.

Interpreting birchbark texts is a precarious business. Occam's razor should always be in reach. The combination of possible archaeological complications, ambiguous historical evidence, and linguistic problems is a challenge in itself. On top of that, we have to deal with patterns of written communication that are totally unfamiliar to modern readers, who are used to a clear distinction between how to 'frame' a message when they speak and when they write. The unexpected patterns we encounter on birchbark have important methodological and theoretical implications for broader discussions of the role of orality and literacy in pre-modern societies. Often, we are unable to figure out the meaning of messages on birchbark when we simply read them, but if we had heard them, everything would have fallen into place. The voices of hundreds of people on birchbark have been crucial in helping us to reach this understanding.

## Color Plates



FIGURE 61 Photograph of N1 (list of revenues).

N1, the first birchbark from Novgorod, was unearthed on 26 July 1951. The text dates from the period ca. 1380–1400 and contains several lacunae. A complete reading of the content is impossible, but it is clear that it concerns a list of revenues from a number of villages. The collectors are Timofej (?) and Foma.

The scribe of N1 also wrote N22 (ca. 1380–1400). Here we find the name of the sender: 'A bow from Ljontij to Timofej (?) (...)' The writer of both birchbarks was either Ljontij or someone else who wrote on behalf of the collectors mentioned in N1 and Ljontij, the sender of N22.

On N1, see DND (648–649), NGB I (16–20), VIII (181, 220–221), IX (124), X (84). On N22, see DND (649–650), NGB II (22–24), VIII (224), IX (127), X (84).



FIGURE 62 Photograph of Staraja Russa 41 with separated layers.

The fragmentary text Staraja Russa 41 dates from the period ca. 1280–1300 and is a typical debt list. In this particular case, weight units are mentioned, most probably referring to salt. See NGB XII (172–173).

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